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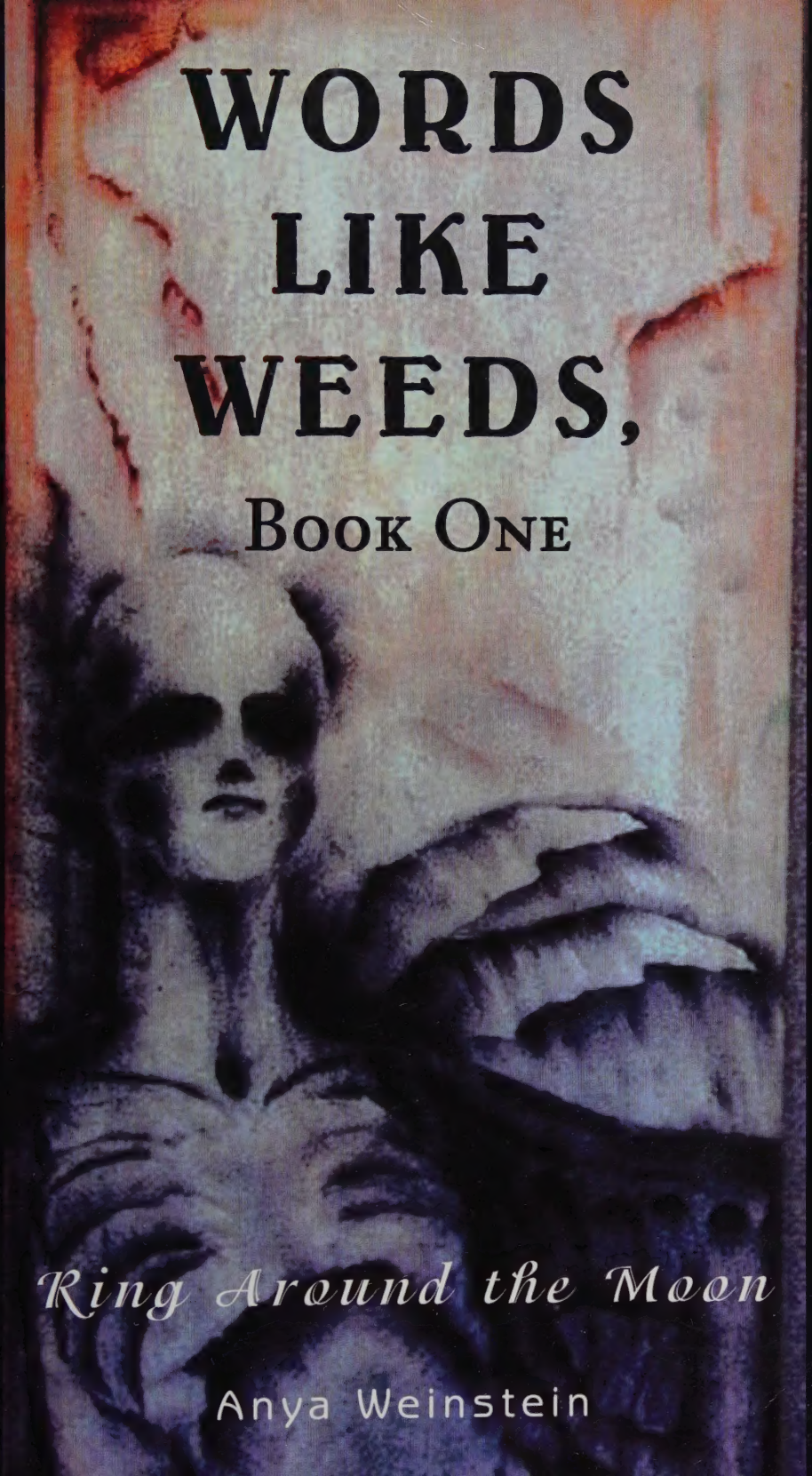
Book One



Ring Around the Moon

Anya Weinstein

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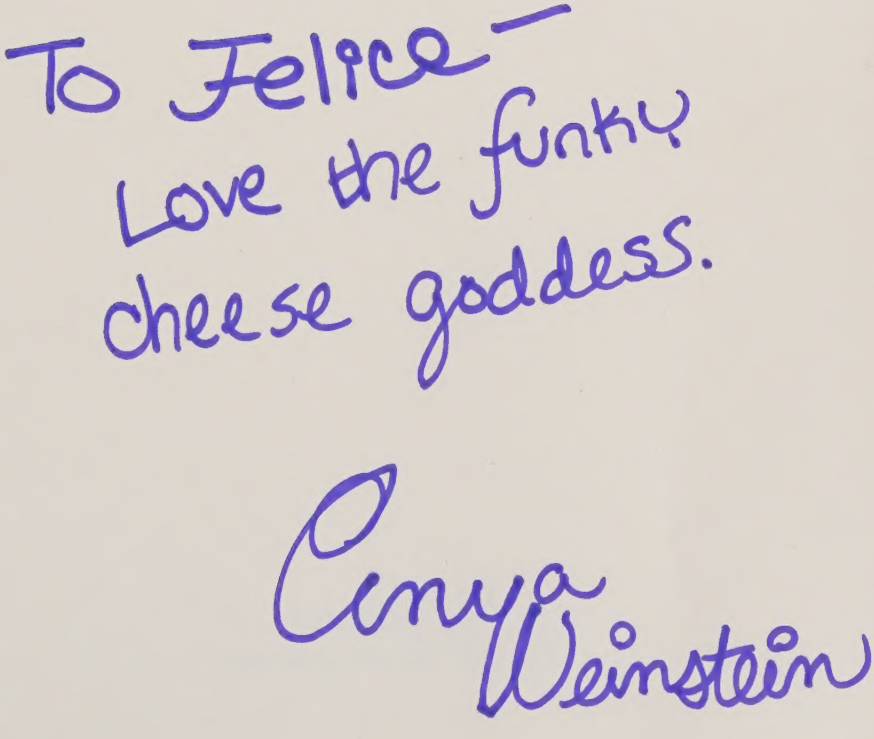

To Jeffrey -
Love the Bunny
dress daddies.

Doug Weinstein

Words Like Weeds, Book One

Ring Around the Moon

Anya Weinstein

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

Words Like Weeds, Book One
Ring Around the Moon

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To Brian, without whom this trilogy would not have been written. And to Fred Phelps, and to people like him, without whom this trilogy would not have been necessary.

Ring Around the Moon *is particularly dedicated to the memory of Bobby Griffith.*

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Prologue

The first egg soared through the cool spring air and, with a violent crack, struck the filthy wooden shingles overlaying Grandmother Farlot's house. More eggs would follow—an entire carton—and each one would explode upon impact to dribble like phlegm down the side of the house. But the first was by far the most damaging.

For it has been said that the first egg hurled into the sky that night is the very one that killed him who threw it. There are doubts that one little egg could cause a murder, as there are doubts that the murder would have occurred had Lucas Farlot not been choked, day in, day out, with the stench of rotten eggs during the last few months of his life.

Such wondering of "what if" is pointless, as was agreed by all closely involved when the entire ghastly ordeal was over. What happened, happened. And what happened was that the first egg, already so rotten that even the pigeons would not go near it, landed directly next to Lucas's bedroom window. There it congealed, just far enough away so that its overbearingly sulfurous odor was instantly suffocating merely by opening a window or stepping outside.

Grandmother Farlot never gave the eggs a thought. During the evening of the attack, she took hardly any notice of it. The sounds of eggshells cracking against her house, along with the sounds of boys' vicious laughter, drifted in through the open front windows along

with the smell. Grandmother Farlot sighed, leaned back in her torn recliner, and muttered to herself, "It's raining again."

Lucas watched the vandals from his bedroom window. He recognized them all as boys from school whose verbal attacks on him had apparently not been enough to satiate their boredom. He heard the cruel laughter and shouts of: "Lucas *Faggot!*" He heard the sickening splat of each egg, and inhaled the sharp smell that they emitted. He watched as the boys ran out of ammunition and left.

Lucas knew they were going home to their brand-new houses with the gleaming front windows and clean, bright vinyl siding to have dinner with their nice, happy families. Afterward, they would help their mothers with the dishes like good sons, and do their chores like good boys, and do their homework like good students, and go to bed satisfied, convinced of their status as good people.

While they slept, they would breathe in and out the clean air that the cool breeze blew in through their open windows while Lucas's throat and nostrils burned with the rotten eggs that they had thrown.

Lucas knew they would all get a good night's rest. And it was then that Lucas decided that he would be the one to change that. In the dim light of evening, he identified the boy who had thrown the first egg.

By the end of the school year, that boy would be dead.

PART I

Asher

CHAPTER 1

In Which Our Hero is Properly Introduced

Eight months earlier…

Towards the end of the slow, lazy days that inhabit the month of August enters another sort of weather, entirely unique to late summer evenings. During this time the white-hot sun has toasted the heavy sky a deep golden red, and even within the cooler boundaries of shadows can one feel a thick heat engulf everything that surrounds him. These are the moments that define summer and all that it is.

In the air, there is merely a whiff of approaching autumn, though a whiff is enough to transform summer's serene demeanor and stir up a feeling of restlessness in everyone and everything. It is felt by all a bit bored with these sultry evenings; by those few impatient trees that have already begun to paint their leaves as yellow as lemonade.

The dark, rich earth, whose bounty was long ago shackled by neat rows of vegetables; and the wild, overgrown fields of Green Haven, Illinois, seem to stir ever so slightly. For in this little town, charmingly quaint and quite affected by the dullness of late summer, no one is immune to that nagging pull deep inside oneself: that feeling

of waiting anxiously for some unknown occurrence to unfold. The venerable buildings themselves seem to pause in contemplation before shuddering a few more brittle paint chips off their ancient wooden siding.

Green Haven was once a town consisting primarily of farms, fields, woodland, and now-antiquated 19th century houses. As it stands today, such houses age terribly without ownership: bricks crumble, termites and other vermin bore holes in the rotting walls, and wooden window frames warp as their glass sluggishly sinks to the ground.

There is very little woodland left that has not yet been cut down; few fields that have not yet been paved over. In the place of those less fortunate fields and woods, enormous new houses dot the horizon like very expensive pimples. Those not yet taken lie in wait, the tall grass and wildflowers ever watchful of the developments that edge closer and closer each day. The newest houses squat a mere few miles away, their very presence as ominous as the sound of distant battle drums.

One such development was Oakland View Estates. It consisted of a number of winding, interlocked streets and was home to no oak trees of any kind, and was just the sort of perfectly planned suburban neighborhood that pops up suddenly in a field when no one quite expects it.

Each house looked nearly identical to the next; each was quite grand, with luminous bay windows set at just the right angle to catch the sunlight in just the right way in order to bear just the right shine. Each house was clean and its yard well watered.

An unmarked two-lane road, paled very little by but a single winter's worth of salt, wove its way around neatly arranged houses and evenly mowed lawns and weed-free gardens complimented by saplings planted right where they should be. This road teemed with young life.

Rollerbladers, skateboarders, and jump-ropers played in the middle of the street, which was strewn with drawings and forgotten bits of chalk. Small bare feet raced wildly over crisp, green, well-manicured lawns, over sun-baked gravel, scurrying like ants to make good use of the last few hours before sundown. Everywhere, children played and dogs barked, pre-teens crowded into pools and toddlers raced after runaway rubber balls. And at the mouth of the street, where it met up with a main road, a makeshift baseball diamond was set up thanks to colored chalk and a few discarded T-shirts to serve as bases.

Tucker Fitzpatrick stood on the pitcher's mound, which was actually a rolled-up T-shirt belonging to the second baseman, Josh. Tucker's well-worn sneakers trod a spring and summer's worth of filth onto Josh's shirt, but no boy on the "field" gave a thought to it. This was far more important than clothing.

This was baseball.

Tucker rolled the ball from his hand to his glove and back again, savoring the moment, savoring the control he had over the batter, Asher Denmont. His bright green eyes glittered in anticipation.

"Think you can handle this one, Tex?" he teased Asher. Asher gripped the bat more tightly, narrowed his smoky gray eyes, and nodded gravely. Tucker laughed aloud at his friend's seriousness.

As it was, Asher faced the west; to him, Tucker was little more than a blurry shadow standing with his back to the blazing light of the setting sun.

All the better to suit Asher's fantasy: in his mind, Tucker was no longer a friendly, impish boy of thirteen. His friend's features were muddled so as to lend a certain grace to his transformation into a fierce major league player. The sun in Asher's eyes and the glare all around made it that much easier to imagine himself onto a real baseball field. He dug a heel into the collar of Ben's old sweatshirt. For a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, all that existed in the universe was Asher Denmont, Tucker Fitzpatrick, a bat and a

ball—and one chance at winning the World Series for the Texas Rangers. Tucker drew back for the pitch.

"Car!" Noah shouted.

The boys grabbed their bases and scattered, running to the side of the road, safely out of the way of the approaching minivan. The car stopped as it neared Aaron, and a woman's head popped out of the driver's seat window. The other boys looked on silently. Asher wiped his eyes. He still saw spots from looking towards the sun.

"Aaron!" the woman scolded in a shrill, grating tone. "What did I tell you to do today?"

Aaron rolled his eyes and raised his right hand to innocently scratch his neck; his left gripped third base. "Clean my room, take out the garbage, look after Samantha."

"And where *is* your little sister?"

"She's at Lizzy's house. Don't sweat it."

"And your room?"

"I swear, Mom, I'm almost done."

"'Almost done' isn't enough. I want you to be totally done with your chores before you go off and play with your friends. Is that understood?"

Aaron caught Asher's sympathetic glance and sighed.

"Yeah, Mom."

"Good. Now say good-bye and get in the car and I don't want to hear another word out of you."

Tossing third base to Quin, Aaron grudgingly muttered a good-bye to everyone and slid open the door to his mother's minivan. The remaining boys watched pityingly as the car drove off.

"Well," Josh said, "we're missing our third baseman." Everyone turned to Tucker.

"Yeah," said Tucker reluctantly. "Guess we should just call it quits for the day."

Shouting their good-byes, the boys dispersed, leaving only Asher and Tucker standing in the middle of the street.

"I could've hit it," Asher said. "Just for the record...I really could've hit that ball."

Tucker grinned. "Sure you could've."

"No, really! I was on the softball team back at my old junior high in Abilene."

"Yeah? Well, that was Texas. We have a different set of standards up here, kid."

"Yeah," Asher joked, "they're lower." Tucker playfully punched him in the arm.

"You're not abandoning me too, are you, Tex?" he pouted half-mockingly.

"Sorry," Asher said, "but I am. I've got curfew in about half an hour. Gotta go in for dinner."

"Shit." Tucker threw the ball up in the air and caught it. "Now what am I supposed to do? Everybody's got stupid curfew."

"What, like *you* don't have it?"

"My mom's got a late meeting," Tucker said. "Or else she's in court tonight. Or still at the office or something. Whatever." A trace of bitterness sneaked its way into Tucker's voice. "Anyway, she won't be back till really late."

"You're not gonna have any dinner?" Asher exclaimed.

"Don't sound so shocked. I can microwave a little pizza or something."

Asher shook his head in disbelief at the nonchalance with which his friend had spoken. Never in Asher's memory had his family not eaten dinner together; even when his father had a late meeting, his mother only postponed dinner until he got home.

"Look, Tucker..." Tucker directed his eyes at Asher, his head still tilted toward the sky as he tossed up his ball again and again. "Why don't you have dinner at my house? My dad's cool, he won't mind."

Tucker's face broke into a wide, lopsided grin, revealing a mouth of pearly white teeth. Asher's heart skipped a beat. From where Tucker stood, the sun illuminated each individual thread of gold

atop his head to frame his tanned cherubic face. It seemed that every part of his friend glowed and shimmered as if he were an angel, and often Asher would catch himself staring, astounded that a person could be so breathtakingly beautiful.

"Y'mean it?" Tucker asked.

Asher shook himself out of his trance. "Well, yeah. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I went and ate my mom's famous pot roast and left you to microwave a pizza, all alone."

Tucker stroked his chin in thought, then raised one eyebrow at Asher. "Famous, huh? What is it, a pop singer?"

"Actually, it's a track runner. In fact, it won a medal in the summer Olympics last year."

"Wow. Got the gold?"

"Bronze."

Tucker snorted. "Bronze isn't winning." He threw Asher the ball. "Is that where you get your astounding athletic skills? From eating your mom's bronze medal-winning pot roast?"

"Har dee har har." Asher paused, rolling the ball around in his hand. "I *could've* hit it," he repeated.

Tucker laughed—a gloriously brassy explosion of irreverence and joy that brought a grin to Asher's lips just hearing it.

Walking down the street to Asher's house, the boys spoke of the wondrous nothings that, as boys, were of their highest concern. From the game of baseball they drew life-or-death combat, each bat a gun, each pitch a grenade, each "out" a painful and brutal casualty. The game contained all the solemnity that nothing else in their lives did. For they had never known life-or-death combat, not really, and within the safe confines of suburbia, they would quite assuredly never experience the terror and shock of having a real gun pointed at their faces.

CHAPTER 2

The Ultimate Challenge

Asher and Tucker walked at the same rate, but not with the same pace.

Tucker walked quickly with a skipping, gleeful step, as though he was always on his way to a party and eager to get there.

Asher moved as a ghost would, with a sort of uneasy grace, swiftly and smoothly, as if terrified to make a sound. As they walked, Tucker reveled in Asher's shy silence, filling it up with jokes and stories, and every now and then Asher would glance up from his careful surveillance of the ground and would watch Tucker from behind the strands of soft black hair that hung down over his eyes. Those eyes, a gentle, cloudy gray, shone at Tucker's every word. Tucker seemed never to notice, enjoying the sound of his own voice as he spun golden threads of witticisms and puns, weaving them into lustrous conversational tapestries, and equally enjoying Asher's eager attentiveness.

Asher's eyes were sponges, absorbing everything around him. He watched with innocent curiosity, and anyone made uncomfortable by his gaze was soon abated when they noticed that in the boy's eye was no hint of antagonism. Things often escaped his atten-

tion—chiefly among these, the time—but never people. People he watched with a benevolent, tolerant gaze.

Tucker's eyes were hard shells, as opposed to Asher's sponges. They ranged from a bright, glistening leaf-green to a dark jade depending on his mood, but always there was a wall separating them from whatever they observed. Underneath the playfulness there was a dark irony, and beneath the irony, an apathy that set up walls inside his eyes. There was a detachment from people that Tucker had built, a palpable cynicism that contributed a speck of darkness to his light temperament.

Passersby could not help but turn to stare at the boys however briefly, for Tucker's outgoing nature drew their eyes toward the boys and Asher's introverted silence held them there. His appearance was wholly unassuming, and one might never have given him a second glance but for the charming air of innocence about him. It was in his walk, his speech, his shy, slow smile. Those lucky enough to catch a glimpse of his gray sponge eyes on the rare occasion that he raised them from underneath his eyelashes would see eyes filled with warmth, kindness and hope.

All in all, what one might see at a glance was a good Christian boy who loved baseball, wore a silver cross around his neck at all times, and went to church with his family every Sunday; who brought home good grades and lived in a good neighborhood and always, always, *always* said "please," "thank you," and "you're welcome." Loved by adults, favored by teachers, generally ignored by most of the other kids.

None of those saw behind Asher's sponge eyes into his mind. The secret fear and shame and self-loathing that permeated his every thought remained a secret; remained hidden from everyone whom Asher knew well. That was the way he liked it. That was the way he needed it to be.

For about two years now, a sense of doubt had sneakily crawled along the walls of his soul. It had been growing and growing with

increasing ferocity until now, when it suddenly came bubbling up just beneath his skin.

Tucker had brought it there.

"You have never really been too interested in girls," the Doubt told Asher, and the outrage brought on by that statement was only surpassed by the pain in knowing it was true. It certainly wasn't that Asher hated girls; he just never saw having a girlfriend as any sort of attainable goal. Girls lived in their own world, impossible for Asher to understand. Some were pretty, but in an unusual, alien way.

"I'm a late bloomer," Asher shot back.

"You don't seem to have any trouble noticing handsome men," the Doubt countered.

"So what if I notice them? That doesn't mean I'm—I'm..." He could barely bring himself to say the word, even to himself. "...one of *them*. I can look—I can appreciate a handsome guy—but that doesn't mean anything."

Then the Doubt invariably asked: "And do all boys feel the same as you do?"

That was a question to which Asher had no swift retort. He'd always liked to think that he was perfectly normal. He had to think that, for there was no way for him to find out whether or not other boys—Tucker in particular—felt the same way he did without revealing his secret. Asher knew—as his family and his church had made it abundantly clear—that to like other men was to go to Hell. How many times had his father turned on the TV and seen coverage of a gay rights parade and shaken his head, muttering, "It's getting worse and worse"?

It was even in the Bible, that it was a sin. Men who liked other men were evil pedophiles, godless heathens, sinners who took part in disgusting and unnatural practices. They were morally inept, and Asher most certainly was not. He couldn't be. It wouldn't be fair at all. And so he found a way to justify each uncomfortable thought

that found a home in his head, and spoke only when spoken to, and hid behind a mask of smiles.

That was to be the ultimate challenge this year, Asher decided: to hide as much as it was possible to hide. To conceal his Doubt at all costs, and hope that it would eventually amount to nothing. No one must know.

Incidentally, there was exactly one person who knew that Asher really did have a horrible secret, and knew exactly what it was. She lived in the first house of an older development across the road from Oakland View Estates, and was watching Tucker and Asher from her seat in the branches of a magnolia tree where she had been reading Dickens all afternoon. And now she set the book down in her lap to watch Asher Denmont. She watched him with great interest, and for a long time, before jumping down from her branch and heading inside.

CHAPTER 3

In Which Tucker Offers His Opinion of Parents

The boys began walking to Asher's house side-by-side, but as Tucker grew fidgety, he shouted: "Race ya!" and promptly broke into a rabbit-run. Asher took off soon afterward, but Tucker got to the front porch first. Asher found Tucker waiting for him on the swinging bench next to the front door, rolling the ball from one hand to the other. Asher stepped forward, unsure of whether to lead Tucker inside or sit down next to him.

Wasn't that swinging bench for lovers? Hadn't that been what his mother said when they decided to buy it for the new house? "Ooh, how romantic! Asher can sit on it with his *girlfriends* when he starts dating," she teased.

Ha ha ha.

Asher swiftly headed towards the front door and smiled and opened it for Tucker.

Tucker thoughtfully examined the interior of his friend's house as he stepped into the foyer. It was the first time he had ever set foot in the Denmont residence since they moved in two weeks ago, but he already knew where everything was. The layout of 122 Oakland View Estates was identical to that of Tucker's house, and Josh's house, and

Noah's house, and pretty much every house in the Oakland View Estates development. The main difference, Tucker noted, between Asher's house and his own was the carpeting: Asher's was a brilliant, pure white; Tucker's was dark green.

At the front of the staircase that was in exactly the same place as in Tucker's house, Asher instructed Tucker to take off his shoes before doing so himself, so as not to tread dirt onto the floor that Mrs. Denmont spent so much time and energy cleaning.

Stupid to have a white rug, Tucker thought to himself. *Too much maintenance.* He rubbed the toes of his socks against the rug. To keep a white rug pure, you had to take off your shoes and be very neat about it. Every little dark spot, every little imperfection, any stain lying around showed through clearly on a white rug. Tucker knew; he had to do all the cleaning and vacuuming at his house. Much better to have a dark green rug; if there were dark stains, they appeared to be part of the rug itself, and thus went unnoticed.

The boys marched through a picturesque living room in which no one ever really lived and into the kitchen. Mrs. Denmont stood at the counter, chopping vegetables. She was a small, thin, pale woman with owlish gray eyes framed by long, thick lashes like Asher's. Two metal barrettes attempted futilely to tame her wiry white-blonde hair, cut just below the ears and exploding from her scalp like fireworks.

"Hi, Mom. Can Tucker stay for dinner?" Asher asked.

Mrs. Denmont looked briefly up at Tucker and smiled. "Sure," she said. She had a kind smile, and a voice as soft and musical as a flute. It seemed to Tucker that little more than a light breeze could simply pick her up and blow her away.

"C'mawn," said Asher, grabbing Tucker's hand. "I'll take you up to my room." He suddenly froze, his eyes fixed on his hand, and dropped Tucker's as though it was a poisonous snake.

Sick, Asher thought, horrified. *"I'll take you up to my room?" That sounded so sick.* But Tucker hadn't seemed to notice, and neither had Mrs. Denmont.

His face red, Asher shoved his hands into his pockets, arched his shoulders shamefully, and mumbled, "Let's go."

Asher's room was in the same room that Tucker's was in his house. The door was marked with a baseball-themed plaque that his father had made for him when he was nine. Inside, the room was fairly neat; all his clean clothes were folded up in his bureau and all his dirty clothes in the laundry basket in his closet. Asher's mother had vacuumed and dusted recently, and the only mess, really, was a book that lay open, facedown, on his pillow.

Nevertheless, Asher felt embarrassed to have Tucker in his room. He stood awkwardly behind Tucker, watching as his friend idly wandered around the room.

Tucker's room was always a mess. He was rather annoyed with the cleanness of Asher's room—and with the incessant cleanness of Asher's nature.

The walls were practically hidden behind sports posters of all kinds—mostly baseball, but also soccer, football, and basketball—along with Asher's baseball cards, each in its own plastic pocket and hung up on the walls in neat columns. Tacked up on the walls and scattered throughout the room were various bits of Texas Rangers memorabilia: a flag here, a newspaper clipping there, ticket stubs from games he'd attended, and a large poster of Alex Rodriguez—Asher's favorite player—just above his bed. Meticulously arranged on his dresser was Asher's collection of sports figurines.

"Cool," Tucker breathed, and ran his finger down a glass case covering a baseball on Asher's night table, on a little polished wooden stand. It was old and frayed and dirty and autographed by Babe Ruth.

"My grandparents, when they lived in New York," Asher explained, "got that and gave it to my dad. And he gave it to me."

Tucker stared at it for a while longer. Asher turned bright red, as he always did when he told a lie. His grandparents had both lived in Texas for their entire lives, just like his parents, and that autograph was printed on.

Asher's father had, however, given it to him. That much was true. Mr. Denmont was the newly appointed manager of a sporting goods store at which he'd worked for over twenty years. That was what had brought the Denmonts to Green Haven: the store's new location in this ever-growing town. He'd given the ball to Asher years ago, and Asher had played with it so many times that it certainly was dirty and ragged enough to look old enough to be his grandparents'.

Mr. Denmont had given Asher the ball for Christmas, with the note: "Someday we'll be selling these with *your* autograph on them." Asher relished the note, and kept it to this day. It was folded up underneath the stand.

"Your dad gave that up?" Tucker asked. "Whoa. He's really cool."

Asher smiled with pride. Tucker's reverence was well worth the lie. "Yeah," he said, "he is."

"My dad would never do anything like that," said Tucker. "Hell, he never gives me *anything*. He doesn't even write me." Tucker lay back on Asher's bed, folding his hands over his stomach. "Ran off to Mexico with some twenty-three-year-old whore named Brenda. I don't know what he's doing, and I don't want to know. Besides, he was just freeloading off my mom anyway, so we're better off without him. Like my mom always says," Tucker raised his voice in an impersonation of his mother, "'Your father was a stupid, lazy, good-for-nothing bastard! Now do your homework so you don't turn out like him!'"

Asher laughed. "And *do* you do your homework?"

Tucker grinned devilishly. "Hell, no."

Taking a seat on his desk chair, Asher propped his feet up on the exposed framework of his bed. "I'm sorry your dad's such a jerk," he said.

"Hey, it's all right. I don't care. Me and my mom do better without him."

He said that. But still, Asher was glad his father would never do what Mr. Fitzpatrick had done. Mr. Denmont was a principled, admirably upright man who'd taken great pains to teach Asher correct values. Asher was quite positive he would never abandon his son, and was glad of that.

"Hey, can I borrow this?" Tucker asked, pointing to the baseball.

"Sure," Asher said without hesitation.

Tucker began to learn towards the night table to take it, then hesitated. "Just like that?"

Asher blinked. "Um…yeah."

Tucker remained still, looking at the baseball, a mix of apprehension and distrust souring his angelic face. "I'll give it back."

"I know you will." Asher shrugged.

"How?" Tucker asked.

"How what?"

"How do you know I'd give it back?"

Asher stared at him blankly. "Well, why wouldn't you?"

Tucker shook his head, holding back laughter. To unquestioningly trust Tucker with his treasured autographed baseball! Not that Tucker really would steal it—but he *could.* Asher didn't seem to realize that.

Stealthily, as if a thief, Tucker pocketed the baseball, all the while looking to Asher, waiting for him to say, "Hey, wait, *when* are you going to give it back?"

He did not.

"You ever get tired of being so good?" Tucker asked tartly.

"What do you mean?" Asher asked.

Tucker shook his head. "Never mind." He fingered the baseball. "You're gonna be damned crushed when *your* dad leaves you," he muttered.

Asher's eyes suddenly flashed with anger. "He wouldn't do that."

"You sure?"

"Well, yeah. My dad isn't like yours. He'd never just up and leave me."

"That's what you think," said Tucker. "Your dad *is* like mine. Every dad is. All dads are the same 'cause all people are the same: they just hate responsibility. They'll do anything to get out of it, 'less it involves money." He tossed up the baseball and caught it again. Asher held his breath as it came dangerously close to the ceiling. "Sorry to rain on your parade, but adults ain't as perfect as you think."

Asher was just about to open his mouth to respond, but just then his mother knocked on the door to tell him dinner was ready. That was fortunate, because Asher had no idea of what he was going to say.

CHAPTER 4

How You Know a Storm's Coming

As Asher and Tucker tramped down the stairs, the enticing aroma of pot roast and vegetables swam more and more vividly in their nostrils. They took their seats at the dinner table and helped themselves to the food.

"No mashed potatoes, Tucker?" asked Mrs. Denmont.

Tucker shook his head. "Don't like 'em. But the roast smells good."

"Why, thank you."

Tucker was just about to dig in when Asher elbowed him. "We wait till Dad comes home from work," he whispered, "and then we say grace. And *then* we eat."

Tucker nodded.

"So," Mrs. Denmont said. "What grade are you going into, Tucker?"

"Eighth."

"Oh! Just like Asher."

They heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs, and Asher's older sister, Jamie, entered the kitchen. She slumped down in her seat, running a hand through her dark hair. "Dad home yet?"

"No," said Mrs. Denmont. "I don't know what's keeping him."

"Prolly got held up in traffic or something," said Jamie.

"There's no traffic in Green Haven," Asher pointed out.

"Whatever." Jamie pulled her hair up into a ponytail, tied it in place with a scrunchie, pulled out the scrunchie, smoothed her hair with her hands, and tied it in place again. "Who's this?" she asked, cocking her head towards Tucker.

"I'm Tucker," he said.

"Asher's friend," Mrs. Denmont said.

Jamie's eyes slid back and forth, from Asher to Tucker. With a grin, she said: "What, is he like your *boyfriend?*"

"Ewwwww!" Tucker exclaimed, recoiling from the table.

All the color drained out of Asher's face. Jamie laughed.

"Jamie!" Mrs. Denmont scolded.

"I'm just joking!" she said. "C'mawn, Asher, I know you're not a homo."

"That's not something to joke about," Mrs. Denmont said quietly. "Please, Jamie, in the future…?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Would you apologize for insulting your brother?"

"Sorry, Ash," Jamie said.

Tucker cast a sideways glance at Asher. He was staring down at his place, his face burning red, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. *What the…?*

"That's okay," Asher mumbled.

"You're not gonna apologize to *me?*" Tucker demanded.

"Yeah, sorry, Tucker," Jamie said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Asher struggled to keep his heartbeat under control. He looked up at Jamie, into the bored expression in her eyes. *Did she know?*

Tucker tapped his knife against his plate in rhythm, a ghost of a smile gracing his lips. From where he sat at the table, he could see into the family room, where a large painting of Jesus on the crucifix

was hung. It was a gruesome sight. "Um, when does your dad come home?" he asked Asher.

Asher checked the clock on the microwave. "He shoulda been home like five minutes ago."

"Working late, probably," Mrs. Denmont said. She turned to Tucker. "He's the manager of the new Texathletics, Ltd. store opening up—you know, the one by the Denny's on Main Street? Lots to do before the official opening."

They sat in silence for a moment. Mrs. Denmont stood suddenly, tossing her napkin on the table. "I'll put the roast back in the oven. You know, to keep it warm."

Asher shuddered, suddenly chilly. That was enough for him to infer that his father wouldn't be coming home anytime soon. He squirmed in his seat, bobbed his leg up and down, cracked his knuckles, and cracked them again, needing to move, needing to get away from this empty table and this room of silent, dead air.

"C'n me and Tucker watch TV?" he asked.

Mrs. Denmont hesitated. "Sure," she finally said.

Asher rocketed up from his chair and into the family room. Tucker followed close behind. He heard Jamie start to head up to her bedroom, and Mrs. Denmont's request that she stay, just to help with dessert. Just to stay in the kitchen for a while longer.

Asher slumped down onto the couch and turned on the TV with too-quick, jerky movements. *Seinfeld* was on. He wasn't allowed to watch that. Change channel. The news was on. He didn't want to watch the news. Change channel. News. News. News. *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Asher set the remote control down on the couch behind him and stared at the TV, not really seeing or understanding anything that was going on. He felt Tucker's eyes on him—Tucker's beautiful, spring-green eyes—but he dared not turn to look. If Jamie knew, he must have given himself away somehow. He mustn't do anything to expose his secret in the future. He must be on high alert.

"What are you?" Tucker asked. Asher twitched in alarm. So much for high alert. "What?" he asked shrilly.

"What are you," Tucker repeated. "You're a Jock, right? Or a Prep?"

Asher sighed in relief. "Um," he said, "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

Asher shrugged.

Tucker rubbed his forehead and sighed. "You mean to tell me you don't know what a Prep is?"

"Yeah," Asher said. "I went to a Catholic school before," he said by way of explanation. It was what he said every time he showed himself to be ignorant. It proved to be a pretty good excuse.

"Man, you really are naïve," Tucker remarked, shaking his head. "Lemme try to explain it to you. Okay, look: it all depends on what you do, where you shop and what music you listen to. I'm a Prep, so I shop at, you know, Abercrombie, the Gap, Old Navy...cool stores."

Asher nodded.

"And I listen to cool music. Z-103. What about you?"

Asher thought a moment. He didn't listen to the radio much. And his parents took him shopping at department stores to save money, so he didn't have any particular style. "Um."

"I bet you're a Jock," Tucker said. "I can tell from your room."

"Okay."

"Now, the ones to look out for in school," Tucker explained, "are the Goths and the Skaters. Do you know what those are?"

Asher shook his head.

"Man! Okay...Skaters are, like, punks. Y'know? Most of them actually skateboard, but a lot of them I think are just in it for the style. Big baggy pants, listen to punk rock, spiked up hair, necklaces with these big metal balls..." Tucker trailed off. "Jerks," he concluded.

Asher nodded.

"Goths are, like, Skaters times ten. I know a couple, and they're just total freaks. Assholes, y'know? They wear black all the time and wear black makeup—even the boys!—and they worship the Devil or something, I don't know."

Asher's eyes widened. "They worship the *Devil*?"

"Prolly. And they listen to, like, heavy metal and junk. Hell, they're all crazy. Fucked in the head, y'know?"

Asher nodded, and discussion of the matter died away in favor of the TV.

For the next two hours, Tucker had little concept of time beyond the half-hour blocks of TV shows. Asher, however, felt every second crawl by, looking frantically at the clock every two minutes, feeling in his bones his mother's anxiety and allowing his own to make his every muscle weak.

Mr. Denmont still hadn't come home. The food was cold, Jamie had retired to her room, it was nearing eight o'clock, and no one knew exactly what to do.

"Do you think there mighta been an emergency or something?" Asher asked Tucker, his voice wavering in fear. "I mean, like a car accident?"

"Huh?" Tucker said.

"My dad," Asher said irritably.

"Oh. He's probably just getting a beer or something," Tucker offered.

"My dad doesn't drink."

Tucker shrugged. "I don't get why you haven't started eating yet," he said. "I'm hungry as hell, myself. 'S'okay if I go home?"

"Okay," Asher said after a long hesitation. "I'll walk you home." He turned off the TV.

Mrs. Denmont was sitting in the rarely used living room reading a book. Her fervently tapping foot betrayed any semblance of placidity.

"I'm gonna walk Tucker home," Asher said to her. She barely looked up; Tucker's exit felt like too much of a confirmation that Mr. Denmont wasn't coming home. She nodded faintly. "Did you leave a note for your mother to tell her you were here?"

"Nope," said Tucker. "It's okay. What time is it? Like, eight? She's probably not home yet. Even if she is, if she doesn't see or hear me, she just assumes I'm asleep."

A pitying look passed briefly across Mrs. Denmont's face. Tucker caught it in a flash before she could change her expression. He hated it when people pitied him.

Asher led Tucker to the front door. The boys said their good-byes and stepped out into the sweltering summer evening. Flashes of heat lightning illuminated the starless black sky every now and then. The air weighed down on the boys' shoulders, heavy and wet.

"Geez, why can't it just decide whether it wants to rain or not?" said Tucker.

Asher made an agreeable incoherent noise in response. Once again he was at a total loss as to what to say, and what to do with his hands.

"So," said Tucker, "only about a week till school starts."

Asher wrinkled his nose. "Where'd summer go?"

"They stole it from us when we weren't looking."

"Who's 'they'?"

"You know. Them."

"Ah."

Tucker idly kicked a pebble. "You scared?"

"No," Asher lied.

"Green Haven Primary's a pretty big building," Tucker said.

Asher smirked. "Pretty big? Fer crying out loud, it's four stories."

"Yeah, but only two of those stories are for us older kids."

"Still."

"Gonna get lost?" Tucker asked.

"Prolly."

"How many times d'you think you'll get lost?"

"I dunno," Asher said. "Zillion?"

Tucker laughed. "Aw, I'll help you out. Me and Josh and Aaron and Noah and Ben and Quin—we'll make sure you're okay."

"Thanks." Asher smiled broadly.

"Hey," said Tucker, "what are friends for?"

The two reached Tucker's front porch.

"It's going to rain," Tucker said with absolute certainty. "Look up there, at the moon." He pointed. "See the ring? That's how you know a storm's coming. When there's a ring around the moon." Another shimmer of heat lightning lit up the sky.

If only one thing could be said for Tucker Fitzpatrick, it was this: he was a brilliant actor, and his skill came naturally. He glanced down shyly at his nervous, shuffling feet, putting just the right amount of redness into his cheeks so that to Asher, he was the very picture of bashfulness.

"Well, g'night," Tucker said, kissed Asher on the cheek, and hurried inside.

On the front porch, underneath the ringed moon, Asher reeled with ecstasy.

It began to rain.

CHAPTER 5

The Waiting

And so he sat.

He sat on his bed, as unsure of what to do as was Mrs. Denmont and Jamie. He heard the muffled voice of Axl Rose coming from his sister's bedroom, as it always did when there was some sort of uncomfortable break in the family's routine. He suspected that his mother was still reading her book and tapping her foot. Asher's stomach growled with hunger, but he could not imagine going to his mother and asking to have dinner without Dad. The entire household was suspended in a state of hungry confusion, of an uncertainty so strong it was almost surreal.

And so he sat.

He wished he had his baseball just then. He worried so about his father: holding the baseball, tossing it up in the air a few times, would help reassure him that his father was okay, and did care about him.

But no—he'd lent it to Tucker, and it would be rude to ask for it back now. Besides, Tucker would enjoy it so much…

Almost subconsciously, Asher raised a hand to his cheek where Tucker had kissed him. He could almost feel the affection from the kiss leak through his skin and into his mouth, and it tasted sweet as

strawberries. Being near Tucker was like stopping time in the middle of a perfect summer day. Even this late at night, with the sounds of crickets' chirrups coming in through his open bedroom window, Asher felt the cool, sharp blades of grass in-between his naked toes. Thoughts of Tucker, like the noonday sun, warmed his arms and stung his eyes with their brightness.

The more Asher thought about Tucker, the more beautiful he seemed, and the more his body responded to those thoughts, the more horrified Asher became.

Stop it! he scolded himself. *Stop thinking! You're not like that!*

Asher promptly switched his thoughts to his father. Was it true what Tucker had said about Mr. Denmont? This was the first time Asher could remember him being so late—there must have been a good excuse.

Asher's stomach growled again. His thoughts swerved back and forth from his father to Tucker, as though steered by a drunken driver. Both subjects were painful to dwell upon, one insinuating doubt as to Asher's morality and the other insinuating doubt as to his father's. He found himself a captive of his faith, every thought a potential landmine, a mental scolding awaiting him at every turn.

He finally resigned himself to sleep, and did not notice when a car pulled into the driveway at one a.m., nor when a rum-sweet kiss was planted on his forehead and the sheet pulled up to his chin.

CHAPTER 6

"And He's Really Cute, Too"

In pitch-blackness, Asher's eyes fluttered open. He sat up in bed and glanced at the glow-in-the-dark travel clock he'd propped up on his nightstand. It was after three a.m., hours too late to still be up and hours too early to awaken. Yet the silence and the pure darkness made it impossible to go back to sleep.

Asher missed the city. He missed lying in bed in his old room, watching the lights from cars, street lamps and other buildings seep into his room and dance across the ceiling. He missed going to sleep to the sounds of buses whizzing past, honking horns and people talking. Abilene wasn't exactly Dallas or Houston, but it was a sizable city with enough nighttime noise to make Asher uncomfortable in the empty silence of Green Haven. Here there was only black, and nothing to hear but a few crickets. The heat and humidity didn't help much, and were made worse by the fact that the house had no air conditioning. In Texas, one would have to be either incredibly poor or incredibly stupid not to have air conditioning. Illinois summers certainly seemed tamer than Texas summers, but that was no excuse.

How did anybody get any sleep around here? Asher kicked his sheet to the end of the bed, then to the floor, and sat very still against

his pillows, practically drowning in the thickness of the air around him.

I need a glass of water, he decided. *That'll cool me off.*

The hallway was just as dark as Asher's room, and he still wasn't very familiar with it. Keeping one hand on the wall to guide him, Asher tried to remember where everything was. As he slowly and carefully descended the staircase, his surroundings began to get lighter, the walls dimly illuminated in shades of gray. The light in the kitchen was already on.

Asher entered the kitchen, blinking in the harsh fluorescent light. Mrs. Denmont was seated at the kitchen table in her robe, sipping a mug of tea. She looked up and smiled at her son.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Asher shook his head, rubbing his eyes. "Did Dad ever come home?"

Mrs. Denmont nodded. "A few hours ago. He...had some extra work he had to take care of. He's asleep now. Want a snack?"

"Not hungry," Asher murmured. He poured himself a glass of water and sat down across from his mother. "I miss Abilene. There, everything wasn't so *quiet*."

Mrs. Denmont nodded. "You know, I grew up in the Colorado Rockies. Every night was like this—very peaceful, very calm. When I moved to the city, I thought it was too noisy. Now that I'm back out of the city, I can't believe I miss all that noise.

"But this does seem like a nice town, and a nice neighborhood. And it's a good opportunity for your father. I think this place will feel like home to us soon."

Asher ran a finger around the rim of his glass. Truth be told, he would have happily moved anywhere, as long as he was far away from his old middle school. But Green Haven really did seem like a nice town—and safer than Abilene.

"So, that boy Tucker seems like a sweet kid," Mrs. Denmont said, interrupting Asher's train of thought.

"He's cool."

Mrs. Denmont smiled warmly. She always seemed to genuinely care about what Asher had to say. Even when he talked on and on about a Rangers or Cowboys game he'd seen on TV, she tried her hardest to follow. She stirred her tea lithely with her spoon and looked intently into the mug, as though seeking answers in the swirling liquid.

"I'm glad you're making friends, Asher," she finally said quietly. "I remember last year, how they…they stopped coming." Asher looked up, but Mrs. Denmont's eyes remained fixed on her tea. "You seemed very unhappy."

The two sat in silence for a moment. Asher was momentarily taken aback, sure that his face was turning beet-red—he never suspected that his mother might have noticed a change in him. Mr. Denmont certainly hadn't, for on the day they left, he'd asked Asher if he'd said goodbye to all his friends. As he had no friends left, it wasn't a lie to say "yes."

"But anyway," Mrs. Denmont said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Maybe Tucker can introduce you to people. When you start school, I mean. He seems nice."

"Yeah."

Mrs. Denmont giggled almost like a schoolgirl. "And he's really cute, too."

Asher froze. And what was he supposed to say to *that*? There was no denying it—Tucker was gorgeous. But why would Asher have noticed it? Would any regular, normal boy notice it? What would a normal boy say?

He glanced nervously up at his mother for a split second, then looked back into his now empty glass. God, why did she have to say that? Did she suspect? No—she wasn't like those jerks at school. Still…

You have to say something, *stupid! She'll notice you stalling!* "Um, I guess so." Asher regretted the words as soon as they were out of his

mouth (even though he *had* said them in a particularly deep voice). Even "I guess so" suggested that he'd noticed how attractive Tucker was. Or did it? Had Asher just given himself away? He would have done anything just then to know what his mother was thinking...how any normal boy would have responded to her comment...what he *should've* said. Now his own mom would think he was a pervert and turn on him just like everyone else had.

Mrs. Denmont frowned. "You okay, Hon? You're shaking."

Asher blinked and shot his mother a deer-in-the-headlights look. "Fine," he replied quickly. "Fine. Just the heat, I guess."

She nodded slowly, understanding, and got up to put her empty mug in the sink. "Maybe you'd better go to bed, then."

"Yeah," Asher said weakly. God Almighty, he was tired. He trudged up the stairs, no longer knowing what to think about anything, least of all himself.

As he entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him, Asher saw the sun already beginning to rise. The houses of Oakland View Estates, in all their monotonous splendor, were silhouetted against a pearlescent sky.

He climbed back into bed, knowing full well that he'd probably be waking up too soon after for more sleep to make much of a difference. The scattered birds' chirping from their perches in the saplings outside the house seemed to provide sufficient noise, however, for Asher was fast asleep within minutes.

PART II

Tucker

CHAPTER 7

The Girl in the Magnolia Tree

On a cool morning in the first week of September, on a Monday that, in all fairness, should not have under any circumstances been a Monday, the children of Green Haven awoke all too early to the bitter realization that summer was over.

Kat Wilder stepped onto the cement walkway that tore her front yard in two and tilted her head back slightly, letting the misty morning air circulate in her nostrils and soothe the back of her throat. Her naked arms tickled with goose bumps, but she began her walk to school without going back inside to get a jacket or sweater; the chill would pass with morning and within barely an hour, she would be content with only her tanktop.

She headed from her house. Her gaze rolled guardedly toward Oakland View Estates, over the brand-new houses that blocked her vision. Beams of sunlight hit the innocuous vinyl siding; invariably colored in light shades of tan, yellow, and blue, and the luminous bay windows bore just the right shine. Not too showy or glittery a shine, not a Las Vegas or Los Angeles shine, but a clean, wholesome shine. The shine of newly washed windows. A shine like the edges of the pages of the Bible.

It nearly made Kat hurl.

Since she'd moved in during the spring of sixth grade year, Kat had met with her best friend and next-door neighbor Avanti Bari to walk to school together. They'd talk as they traipsed through the field and through the short distance of woodland, climb over the fence at the edge of school grounds and into the sports fields, and enter through the gymnasium. Last year, however, local contractors began setting up a housing development on that field—*their* field—and the girls never forgave the world for these gargantuan, siding-smothered eyesores.

Kat walked alone on this day, Avanti still on vacation with her family. She idly kicked a few pebbles here and there, turning into the street that had the honor of winding around all the disgusting monstrosities. She would, like every morning, cut through the field and through the wood, even if the field was no longer a field and the wood was no longer a wood and cutting through it meant trespassing on some stranger's property. She didn't care if she was caught and punished: it was *her* land. It had been hers and Avanti's since spring of sixth grade and there was no way some stupid, ugly houses were going to force her to walk to school the long way—along an actual street, entering the building through its actual front doors.

Crunching dry leaves underfoot, Kat made her way through the tiny sliver of wood left. Here, the ground was always covered with leaves, and Kat had loved stepping on them and creating those loud, crunching noises ever since she began using the shortcut. It always depressed her when winter rolled along and her mother made her take the bus to school.

Then, after school, even on the most frigid of days, she would walk along her familiar meandering path—sometimes with Avanti, sometimes alone—if only to smell the fresh air...if only to make believe that a paved road, complete with polluting autos whizzing by as shining blurs, did not lie but twenty feet away.

Kat approached the last line of trees in the wood, their majesty thrust up against an old, rusted wire fence and heard the last sweet

note of nature's gentle melody before an expanse of well-cut grass and painted white lines choked it into silence. Behind her, a small man-made pond reached with faint, hazy arms of mist up to the sky, as if weakly straining to escape.

Taking special care not to rip or dirty her cargo skirt, Kat slowly and deliberately climbed over the fence, as she and Avanti had done countless times before, and crossed the neatly mowed field towards the school.

It was terribly early to be going to school—only 7:00, which was a good half-hour before most of her classmates would show up—but Kat had, after all, important matters to attend to. She felt the hard bulges in her skirt pockets and gripped her gardening trowel and gulped.

Very important matters.

CHAPTER 8

In Which a Freedom is Relinquished

Tucker's radio alarm clock awoke him with a start. As he switched it off and turned to the window, his heart sank at the sight of the tree leaves that got paler and more lifeless each day; at the sight of the sky that got progressively darker each morning. And he knew: summer was over.

Still groggy and half-asleep, Tucker wandered into the bathroom, picked up a towel, paused to remember why he had done so, remembered, and got into the shower. Stepping out of the bathroom and back into his bedroom to dress, Tucker shivered in response to the imagined briskness of the air outside. The day was to be hot, and the rising sun was already warming the air, but Tucker felt cold simply because all early morning schooldays were *supposed* to feel cold and unpleasant. The boy closed the window.

A yellow leaf had, during the night, fallen off a tree outside and had been blown by a gentle breeze through Tucker's window to rest on his dresser top. He scowled at it. Autumn was no good, no good at all. School in itself was no good. And he had a full ten months of it between now and the next long vacation.

Worse than thinking about the ten months ahead was the realization that those ten months were only ten months out of five more years of schooling, after which lay college, after which lay a career. Tucker drew in a sharp, deep breath, suddenly feeling suffocated. He closed his eyes and paused while he regained his composure.

You're an actor, aren't you? Then act. Pretend you like it.

Today Tucker was to begin his eighth year—discounting kindergarten—of what was, in his mind, forcible pointlessness. He had agreed to meet his friends to walk to school at seven.

My friends, Tucker silently amended, *and Asher.* Asher, who was—he sneered at the thought—in *love* with him. Pathetic. It wasn't the homosexuality that disgusted him; Tucker could care less. No, his repulsion was based in the way Asher followed him around with wide-eyed worship, casting aside his dignity as he so often did. Despite his seeming perfection, Asher was perfectly helpless. And Tucker had him in his claws.

Tucker feared that he had been visibly repulsed when he finally fitted together all the pieces of Asher's secret. He mustn't show his repulsion if the role was to be played correctly: repulsion wasn't in his character. Asher hadn't seemed to notice anyway, the stupid fag, and Tucker had somehow forced himself to kiss Asher on the cheek: to lead him on.

The kiss. Tucker sighed in reflection. Yes, that had been a difficult scene. He hoped his performance had been as convincing as he suspected it had been—the shyness, the abashed affection, the choking down of his disgust. All in all, it would be quite a difficult role to play.

But he could make it easier, Tucker knew, if he made sure to write the script himself. If he stayed one step ahead of Asher; keeping control of the storyline; knowing exactly what came next and what was required of him.

Now dressed for school, his still damp hair easily sculpted by hair gel, Tucker briefly sat down at his computer and opened up a word

processor file. He glanced over its contents, smiled, threw his backpack over his shoulder, and left the room.

CHAPTER 9

A Curious Piece of Work

Asher performed his morning routine more quickly than usual, with all the nervousness and discomfort of one having to reintroduce himself to an old, nearly forgotten habit. At last, having showered and dressed and eaten breakfast and brushed his teeth and checked his backpack for all the necessary school supplies, he realized that there was nothing left to do, really, but actually, physically *go* to school.

And so he left his house, shouting goodbye to his family, and headed toward his new friends, who had congregated at the mouth of Oakland View Estates. His gaze immediately latched onto Tucker, and we shall see the boy now as Asher sees him in this moment.

A curious piece of work, Tucker Fitzpatrick was. In all outward appearance, he looked to be a clean, well-groomed, well brought up young man. He was fashionably dressed in khakis and a knit orange turtleneck, a silver necklace draped around his neck and expensive sneakers on his feet, his hair swept forward with gel and spiked upward at the forehead in accordance to the popular style of the time. Standing slightly rigidly in front of the Oakland View Estates sign but not quite leaning against it, one hand at his side and the other in his pocket, his eyes squinted and his brow furrowed in what

seemed a very serious and thoughtful expression, facing the east, Tucker seemed at that moment to glow.

As we have said, lovely in all respects, but was he as nice a boy as he would appear? This was but his costume for schooldays. Asher had seen him head outside with neither hair nor teeth brushed, in the same shorts and T-shirt he had worn to bed the night before and all the previous day. Without a care to his appearance, he would play sports for hours, go to sleep in these very same clothes, and repeat this procedure again and again, day after day, until his friends all but forced him to take a shower.

This squeaky-clean and smartly dressed boy was Tucker Fitzpatrick in disguise; Tucker Fitzpatrick pretending to be a boy of thirteen, feigning the years that he seemed to lack in maturity. For a certain element exists in a young boy: mischief in his bright, dancing eyes, a playful bounce in his stride, a sly grin and an eternally facetious disposition in general. This element had never gotten around to abandoning Tucker.

He noticed Asher approaching, turned to him, and with a single twitch of his lip which quickly evolved into his accustomed broad grin, the costume; the disguise; the appearance of a well brought up boy tore apart at the seams and fell gracefully to the ground as a parachute would, to be available at Tucker's feet whenever it was sorely needed, but otherwise out of the way.

"Hey," Tucker greeted Asher. "You ready for today?"

"Want the truth or a bold-faced lie?"

"First the lie, then the truth."

Imitating Tucker's chameleon-like ability to become another person instantaneously, Asher widened his eyes and clasped his hands together in an exaggerated parody of excitement. "Oh me, oh my, what jolly good fun school will be! I can't wait to meet my teachers and get all my heavy textbooks and get homework assignments! Won't it be fun? More fun than a barrel of rattlesnakes! Well...actu-

ally, no, not a barrel of *rattlesnakes*...but definitely more fun than a barrel of anacondas!"

Tucker snickered. "Okay, now the truth."

Asher dimmed his eyes and slouched, assuming the position he had been in before. "Somebody kill me. That school's a dang labyrinth."

"Tell me about it," Noah said, lying on his back and running his fingers casually through the grass. "I remember *my* first day. Man, you think it's big now, imagine being a *kindergartner* in that place! I'd never even been to school before. My whole first week, my mom had to come to school with me because I was so scared."

"Awwww," Tucker teased, "widdoo bitty Noah was *scawed*! Poow widdoo baby needed his *mommy*!"

"Damn right I needed my mommy," Noah grinned.

Asher drew his schedule from his pocket, unfolded it, and looked it over for the hundredth time. "Yeah, but a kindergartner only has one classroom number to remember. I have nine."

Noah stood up and held out his hand. "Give it here," he said to Asher, and examined the schedule. He whistled. "Ooh, you've got Mr. Pierce for Math." A sympathetic look on his face, Noah clucked his tongue and patted Asher on the shoulder. "Me and Aaron both had him last year. I am so, so sorry."

"Why?" asked Asher.

"Cos the man's a nut?" said Aaron. "He's got this Wheel of Misfortune..."

"Oh yes, the Wheel!" Tucker grinned. "I remember that. I had Mrs. Hailey across the hall from your class, and every time someone had to spin the Wheel, we were herded over there to watch. It was like an event. *You* had to spin it a lot, remember?"

Aaron threw a handful of grass at Tucker and continued. "Anyway, whenever somebody doesn't do his homework, Mr. Pierce makes him spin the Wheel."

"The tech teacher made it," Josh said.

"Right," said Aaron. "So like, when you spun it, it would land on, like, *Call Parents* or *Lunch Detention* or *Write 'I Will Do My Homework' 50 Times* or *Get Beaten Like a Red-Headed Stepchild*, or something."

Tucker laughed. "'Get Beaten Like a Red-Headed Stepchild'? I don't recall *that* being on the Wheel."

"It was there," said Noah. "I swear to God, it was actually written on there."

"Nobody ever got it," said Josh.

"Nobody ever got anything except for *Call Parents*," Aaron pointed out. "Y'know, I bet the thing's rigged."

"Where's Ben?" Josh interrupted, looking at his watch. "He'd better be here soon, or we're gonna be late."

"Don't worry," Noah said. "We still have a few minutes. Look, here he is now."

Ben, a slightly chubby, brown-haired boy with an old green backpack and a generous abundance of freckles, came lumbering toward his friends, making a commendable but futile attempt to simultaneously put his lunch in his backpack, zipper it, throw it over his shoulder, and walk normally.

"Can we go now?" Tucker muttered.

"Sorry," Ben said sheepishly. "I forgot to set my alarm clock."

"*You* forgot to set your alarm clock?" Noah exclaimed in mock horror. "*You*? Ben? Mr. Organized?"

Ben smiled dryly. "Yes, even I've been known to slip up from time to time." He checked his watch. "See, it's only a minute after seven. I didn't even make you guys late."

"Well, we'll be late anyway if we don't move our asses," Josh said sourly. "Now let's just *go* already."

The boys hoisted their backpacks over their shoulders and headed down the street, kicking pebbles and various pieces of litter as they walked. Asher, as always, stuck by Tucker's side.

As luck would have it, the day was warm and sunny. Playful golden light filtered through the canopy of yellowing leaves overhead, warming Asher's bare arms. Before long, by casually glancing over his shoulder once or twice, Asher began to notice the way Quin lagged behind the group, usually silent, with Ben appearing to be the only link between him and everyone else.

"Hey, Quin!" Josh called. "Keep up, will ya?"

Quin, who had been staring thoughtfully at the sky, appeared startled, then embarrassed. He blushed, quickened his pace a bit, and looked from face to face among his friends, seeking their notice and approval.

Asher's eyes met Quin's, and they smiled, and Asher turned back round to talk to Tucker. Asher knew what it was to be apart from everything, lost in contemplation and content there. He had seen something of himself in Quin, and vice-versa: the intuitive connection of dreamers.

But Asher was too determined to fit in to revert back to his old self for long. He had to keep himself in check, making sure he never got *too* quiet. When with the group, Asher constantly reminded himself to stand up straight rather than slouching; to look people directly in the eye rather than always looking at the ground; and to walk confidently and strongly, as his father did.

Asher was masculine. There was no question. There could never *be* any question, not with his shoulders squared and his voice deepened.

There *would* never be any question, Asher swore to himself, as long as he had anything to do with it.

CHAPTER 10

"Bam"

The road along which the boys were traveling was lined with older houses and unkempt gardens. Asher stared into the depths of a long, straight driveway framed tightly by two neat rows of small evergreens, planted with the barest amount of creativity. The image gave Asher the uncomfortable sensation of looking into infinity. He was still staring at this pathway when Josh said suddenly, "Hey. Isn't this where Lucas Faggot lives?"

He had paused in front of an old wreck with paint the color of dried feces chipping off its shingles. The house was set back a ways from the road, engulfed in the darkness of its surrounding trees. Tucker squinted in the morning sunlight and looked down at the mailbox. It read, in faded letters, "Farlot."

"Yep. It is."

Aaron grinned deviously. "Y'think he left for school yet?"

"What are you suggesting?" Tucker asked, slyly raising an eyebrow.

"I dunno, what are *you* suggesting?"

"Who's Lucas…um…Faggot?" Asher interrupted.

The boys exchanged silent glances, each searching for words that could possibly convey an accurate sense of Lucas's overwhelming dorkiness.

"He's a loser," Tucker said simply. "Torn jeans, punk tee shirts, spiked bracelets…" He rolled his eyes. "You know, classic wannabe skater getup. Only he's too poor to pull it off. Dirty…stinky…can'tcha tell from looking at that dump?"

"Is he really a-a…" Asher paused, hoping his curiosity wouldn't give him away. "Is he really a, you know, a…that is to say, does he…uh…does he really…"

"Is he a faggot, you mean?" Tucker asked, in a tone that seemed to say, "And why would *you* want to know?" Or maybe it was just Asher's imagination.

"That's just what we call him," Josh said. "Lucas Faggot. Pisses him off. But I wouldn't be surprised if he really *was* a fag."

"Doesn't he have a girlfriend, though?" Ben asked.

"A *girlfriend*?" Josh laughed. "What girl in her right mind would date *him*?"

"Someone named Kat Wilder, I hear." Ben shrugged.

Tucker rubbed his chin. "I don't think I know her…the name doesn't sound familiar."

"She's probably a poor, dirty psycho, like him," Aaron said.

"Maybe *she's* a *he*!" Noah said deviously. Everyone laughed. "He's enough of a freak to like that kinda thing!" he added.

"Homos *are* freaks," Josh scoffed. "They should all be shot. Any fag comes near me…" He raised his arms as if holding a shotgun. "Dead."

"Yeah, that's nice," Ben said, rolling his eyes.

"Hey, it's the truth. It's just how I feel," said Josh, holding his palms out defensively.

"And it's in the Bible too," Asher added. "It's wrong to be gay. Even God says so."

"That's what I've been saying all along!" Josh agreed. "It's unnatural. Y'know, we should be taking a stand against those fuckers. Any perverted fairy come, try to rape me or whatever, 's getting his head blown off." He raised his arms in a hunting stance again. "Bam."

Asher laughed. "Yeah. Bam."

CHAPTER 11

Too Many People

With Tucker leading the pack, the boys made their way past one last cluster of trees, and the mammoth structure of crumbling brick that was Green Haven Primary School came into view. A despairing silence descended heavily upon them, and for a moment the only sounds were those of the other children as they shouted and laughed, those of buses and cars driving to and fro, and those of the birds chirping. Surrounded by friendly yellow school buses, with the sun shining down on it, swarmed by hundreds of yelling, chattering kids, it seemed almost a joyous place.

Almost.

"Well," Ben sighed, moving ahead of the others, "here goes nothing."

Nearly blinded by the glare of early morning sunlight as it reflected off the large windows lining the building, Asher shuffled along, occasionally hesitating to readjust his backpack. Smaller children entering kindergarten and first grade, clutching their mothers' hands, gawked at him with the same terrified expression with which they gaped at everything around the school. Asher suspected that he looked somewhat similar.

Presently, a raging river of preteens led Tucker's group away from the younger children in the bustling lobby and into the hallways to which they belonged. Asher made his way through the swarming corridor with his friends, unconsciously but deftly maneuvering between passersby as though they were opponents in a soccer game. He watched Tucker, who walked just a little ahead of the rest of his friends, seemingly enveloped in a protective casing that kept anyone from bumping into him.

With a clear, sharp pang of realization, Asher felt the weight of claustrophobia bearing down on his back. There were too many people at this school, he thought, but it wasn't just Green Haven's laughably old-fashioned grouping of elementary and middle school. It had been uncomfortably crowded in Asher's old school as well, even though it was practically sparse compared to many middle schools. It *felt* crowded.

It had felt crowded and hopelessly large to Asher on the first day of sixth grade and had never since lost its touch. Perhaps it was the jump from elementary school; from a single class of twenty or so children to nine classes of twenty-five. Perhaps it was the jump from knowing almost everyone in school as fellow children and fellow human beings to knowing almost no one—for there were too many human beings to really get to know. Perhaps it was the jump from working in groups with his familiar classmates to working alone at a solitary desk, surrounded by strangers.

And gradually, the sheer mass of students caused each to lose their individuality in the eyes of their peers. They ceased to be fellow children and fellow human beings and became Preps and Jocks and Skaters and Goths and Nerds. And gradually, the insults grew in number and in ferocity from the pitiful gibes of children to near-constant torment.

A tall seventh grader jostled past Asher, their shoulders knocking together as he passed. Asher rubbed his shoulder resentfully. There were just too many people here.

CHAPTER 12

The Girl Who Looked Like Death

Quin, Ben, and Noah ducked, one by one, into their respective homerooms before Tucker, Josh, and Aaron pointed Asher to their own.

"Hey." Josh elbowed Tucker in the side, pointing ahead. "Look who it is." A girl walked ahead of them, almost entirely robed in black.

She looks like Death! Asher thought fearfully. *What a scary girl!*

She carried a plain black backpack and wore a black tanktop with the word ZERO emblazoned across it in silver block letters, a black cargo skirt, a pair of enormous black boots, and what appeared to be fishnet stockings on her arms. Upon closer examination, Asher saw that they were in fact the sleeves of what once had been a mesh shirt; around her shoulders the material was torn and ragged and held up by a few large safety pins. Her thick hair, tied in two buns on top of her head, was black with streaks of bright blue, and her lips and eyes were cloaked in black makeup. The skin of her face was deathly pale, almost white, in stark contrast to everything else about her. On her fingers she wore chipped black nail polish and about seven heavy pewter rings. Hung loosely on her wrist was, oddly enough, a token neither black nor disturbing in any way. It was a bracelet of large,

somewhat clunky unpainted wooden beads strung on a thin leather strap.

And around her neck, the girl who looked like Death wore a black beaded choker, from which hung a delicate silver ankh—the Egyptian symbol of life.

"Freak Girl!" Aaron cried. "Long time, no see!"

"Freaker, freaker, pussy eater!" Tucker shouted.

With an apathetic, almost bored expression, the girl turned around. Her eyes were as dark as her wardrobe: a deep, rich brown that looked black from afar. Her eyes were half-closed, and though the black eyeliner spread thickly around them gave her something of a sorrowful appearance, they were sharp and alert. She only appeared languid; nothing went past those eyes unnoticed.

"Tucker, Tucker, motherfucker," she replied, not missing a beat.

"Ooh, good one," Tucker taunted. "Did you stop doing drugs over the summer, Freak Girl? Cos your mind seems sharper."

"Maybe you just got dumber," she replied, "if that's even possible."

"Maybe you just got uglier," Josh shot back, "if *that's* possible!"

Freak Girl smiled. It wasn't a sardonic smile; inexplicably enough, it was genuine and radiating with warmth. And it was directed at Asher. He looked down at his feet. There was something about that girl that made him uneasy.

She too then glanced down at the ground, tapping the heel of her boot against the linoleum and sucking on her lip in deliberation.

"Uh-oh," Josh grinned, "she's plotting to murder us."

"Awww, looks like the 'happy pills' aren't working," Tucker said.

"If anything isn't working," Freak Girl muttered, "it's your brains." She suddenly squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head slightly, as if to say, "No, no, no…what am I doing?" Freak Girl opened her eyes, looking one more time at the group of boys who now were joking that demons had possessed her. She looked at them with deep sadness and—was it really?—pity. She then turned to Asher.

"A word of advice," she said to him. "Try not to get too involved with those guys. They're a bunch of jerks, all of them."

"Asher," Tucker mocked, "don't get too involved with *Goths*. They're a bunch of freaks, all of them." Tucker, Noah and Josh snickered. Only Asher remained silent, frozen in the penetrating gaze of the girl who looked like Death.

"You'll find out soon enough," she said, and spun around and walked away.

CHAPTER 13

In Which Asher Attracts the Attention of Jenny Morello

Asher placed the folders of his later hours in his locker and closed it, carefully slipping the combination into his pocket. As the boys entered their homeroom, they found on each desk a packet of information, each addressed to a different student. They wandered awkwardly from desk to desk, looking for their own names. Asher was seated in the very first row, third seat back, directly to Tucker's right. Noah and Josh were seated a few rows down.

Asher glanced about himself, examining his new homeroom. At the front of the room sat a young woman who was obviously new at teaching, for she tended to fiddle a bit too frantically with the items on her desk, and every few seconds she would survey the teenagers in her room with an expression of barely concealed terror.

There was no indication as to what Ms. Avola—as it was written on the blackboard in sharp, precise cursive—actually taught. Asher saw no colorful posters, no grade-school-inspirational banners that might be found in other classes. There was a front board, a sideboard, and a backboard, all clean of chalk dust. The cork of the bulletin boards were covered with sheets of blank white paper, waiting silently and expectantly for well-written essays and perfectly scored

tests to be stapled to them. Asher noticed only one poster interrupting the blandness of the room: a lengthwise banner urging students to never settle for less than their best. It was the sort of thing Asher had seen for sale at Hammett's Learning World whenever his mother took him to buy children's art supplies for Jamie.

Aside from that single poster, the classroom, with its gray cinderblock walls and undressed windows, might as well have been a prison cell.

Toward the center of the room, Noah and Josh had slid around in their seats so as to face Asher and Tucker. Thus the four congregated, huddling together like football players.

"The lockers must get smaller and smaller every year," Noah said. "I don't know how they do it, but I swear they've been shrinking the lockers."

"Maybe they put them in the clothes-dryer," Josh quipped.

"Maybe we're just getting too big for this lame-ass little kids' school," Tucker retorted. "Man, I can't *wait* till I get to high school."

"Ya mean secondary school?" said Noah.

"Secondary school," Tucker snorted. "People haven't called it that since, like, forever. Regular people, I mean. Everybody 'cept this stupid hick town calls it 'high school,' but no—we have to live in the damn 1800's or whatever." He snapped his gum loudly, defiantly.

"Um," Ms. Avola said in a tiny voice. "Um, um, excuse me? You there, in the orange shirt?" She checked her seating chart and said more loudly, "Excuse me? Tucker Fitzpatrick?"

Tucker turned to her with the slow, bored expression of a cow chewing its cud.

"No gum in school. You're gonna have to spit it out. Sorry, that's just the rule," she said sheepishly. Incidentally, when she herself had been in middle school, Tucker was just the sort of boy whose brazen attitude had shamed her. For she was always one to follow the rules, no matter what they were, and felt a curious mixture of contempt and envy toward them that so coolly and unabashedly disregarded

orders. Now, even despite the age gap and the turn in authority, she was suddenly sent back into the body of that quiet, bookish thirteen-year-old, and felt less a teacher asking a student to remove his gum than a geeky teacher's pet bossing around one of the cool kids.

Grudgingly, Tucker pulled the gum out of his mouth in a long rubber string and attached it to his backpack as one would a key chain.

"Ewww!" Josh exclaimed, laughing and savoring his own hidden gum. "That is so disgusting."

Tucker beamed with pride. "I bet you anything it'll still be stuck on there by the end of the year."

"Five bucks?" Noah offered.

"Ten."

"You got yourself a deal." Tucker held out his right hand.

"Um," Noah said, "could I shake the hand that you *didn't* use to pull the gum out of your mouth?"

Tucker laughed and the two shook left hands.

Asher, who had been taught to not approve of even the most casual gambling, had opened his mouth and had been about to speak, but stopped himself just in time. What would his friends think of him if he were to ruin their harmless fun with a religious lecture? They would merely laugh at him and think him stiff. No, Asher was nothing more than a geek. He had no place bossing around the cool kids. He was lucky to have them as friends at all.

Asher turned away to look randomly around the classroom, ashamed that he hadn't the courage to stand up for what he believed in. His gaze suddenly fixed on a girl sitting across the room, in the very back. It was Freak Girl: the girl who looked like Death! Asher had no idea she was in their homeroom; she must have slipped in unnoticed while they were talking.

The very presence of this girl was unnerving to Asher, though she was doing nothing more insidious than quietly reading a book. Seated all around her were more popular, bubblier girls. The appar-

ent leader of the group, Jenny Morello, confidently sat atop her desk, higher up than anyone else in the group, her long legs draped over the edge of her chair. She was of average height, made taller by fashionable platform sandals, her naturally brown hair dyed and highlighted various shades of blonde, her naturally brown eyes turned blue by contact lenses. She was of the peculiar nature of not being terribly artistically inclined but for the application of cosmetics. Even now she obscured even the faintest imperfections on her face with naught but a casual sweep of the brush. And as she painted, she chatted with several friends, all of whose hair bore the same blonde highlights and all of whose faces bore the same white eyeshadow, cheek glitter and lip gloss in strict accordance to the style of the time.

Dressed only in the most fashionable clothing, their brightly colored, often shiny or sparkly, shirts reading such boasts as "Princess," "Angel" or "Goddess," they tittered on in the most blissful and careless manner imaginable. Freak Girl was like a black hole, silently disturbing their chatter.

A friend of Jenny's tapped her on the shoulder. One eyebrow raised, she said in a low voice: "Hey, that guy over there is staring at you."

Jenny glanced across the room. "Josh? Oh yeah, he's had a crush on me for years."

"No, not him. That kid with black hair."

Jenny looked again, at Asher. He was no longer looking—if he had ever been—but rather seemed to be engrossed in a conversation with his friends. Freak Girl glanced up from her book, unnoticed, before sinking further into her seat.

"Do you know him?" asked the girl. "I've never seen him before."

Jenny shook her head, sending waves of her yellow mane cascading down her back. "I think he's new. He is *cute*, though." She swung her legs over her chair and crossed the classroom. As soon as Asher noticed her walking directly towards him, he blushed, lowered his head and pretended to be absolutely fascinated by his class schedule.

Jenny plopped down on the unoccùpied desk in front of him, laying her hand on his desktop. "Hi," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen you before. Are you new here?"

Asher kept his eyes on the many silver bracelets on her wrist, and on her perfectly applied ice-blue nail polish, shyly avoiding her gaze. "Yeah," he said in a near-whisper. Her tone was gentle and innocent, and when Asher dared glance up at her face, her dark blue eyes were sensitively inquisitive.

He was scared to death of her.

"That's Asher," Tucker cut in. "He just moved here from Texas."

"Texas!" Jenny exclaimed, and her plucked eyebrows shot up. "Say something," she ordered Asher.

He blinked. "Like what?" he asked.

"Lahk whut!" Jenny repeated, savoring Asher's Texan accent. "That is *so* cool! Where in Texas are you from?"

"Abilene."

"Hm...I've never heard of it."

"Not a lot of people have. It's not too big a city." Asher's words tumbled out in a slurry mess, barely audible. He hoped that this was because he found Jenny to be pretty—the nervousness every boy was expected to feel around a girl. But looking back up at her glittery face, he realized that, no, he didn't find her particularly attractive at all. Not anywhere near as beautiful as Tucker. And the shyness he felt was the same shyness that ailed him when meeting anyone new, boy or girl.

Guess I'm just a loser, then, he thought to himself. Yet there was a touch of relief in his self-denunciation: there was, in his meeting with Jenny, nothing to prove him heterosexual, but still nothing to prove him anything otherwise.

Jenny, unaware of the dispute raging within Asher's mind, continued flirting with him.

"Ooh, you're shy," she whispered, then erupted in a fit of giggles that Josh, judging by his sudden smirk, found quite charming. "That's so cute!"

"Asher, cute?" Josh mock-pouted. "Jenny…I thought I was your honey-bunch."

"You are, you are," Jenny said.

"Well, aren't *I* cute?"

"You're *very* cute," she said solemnly.

Ms. Avola cleared her throat. "Er…Miss? Miss? Excuse me, Miss? Please return to your seat."

Jenny realized that the teacher had been addressing her, got up, and tapped Asher's desk leisurely with the knuckles of one delicate hand. "I'll see you later," she said, and returned to her seat.

"Dude, she has the hots for you," Noah said in a low voice. Asher blushed crimson red. The entire situation boggled him and, truthfully, made him uncomfortable. Why would she? What reason had he given Jenny to like him? And what was he to do with her affection if he was sure he could not return it?

CHAPTER 14

In Which is Seen a Creature of Misery

Now we will, if the reader would indulge us, separate ourselves from the familiar actors in our play to take a closer look at a boy who has thus far served only as scenery. But simply because he does not speak, do not assume him to be unimportant, for what brews in the head is of an infinitely purer potion than what bubbles from the tongue. Amidst the chatter and laughter of his peers, this child had slipped into the classroom disregarded, took off his hat immediately without being asked, sat himself at his desk, and there he busied himself by scribbling.

We meet the child as he enters the room.

In places where the wind is harsh and ceaseless, one may find the slimmer, more delicate trees bent over from the constant pressure. Such was this boy, for surely no slimmer or more delicate frame could be known to hold within it a child, and from the winds of his tormentors his body was hunched forward.

Quite tall for his age, the boy's well-worn blue-and-green striped T-shirt hung loosely off his bones. There were holes in his jeans, his sneakers, his socks and his shirt, and his red baseball cap had long ago faded to a sort of brownish pink.

Below the brim of his hat was an ashen face, long, thin, and its cheekbones distinct. His cold hazel eyes were deeply set under his brow so that he seemed to be in a constant state of woe. And perhaps he was. His mouth hung above his pointed chin in a frown.

Upon the old creaking wooden floor his feet shuffled as if forced against his will by some nameless entity to move forward. His hands stuffed into his pockets, his eyes refusing to lift themselves from the floorboards that sank ever so slightly beneath his heavy feet, the boy appeared to want for nothing except solitude. This disposition—"Leave me alone and I'll do the same for you"—is always easily accepted by those who cross paths with so gloomy a creature. For if a living black cloud; an unkindly sight such a this; wants nothing to do with anyone, well then, so be it.

Dare you look into his eyes? Dare you openly seek out the winds that have, over time, forced his being's frail skeleton into a stoop? Dare you march forth through his empty eyes into the thoughts that swim about his mind: the innards of his soul? Dare you concern yourself at all?

Above his eyes were furrowed brows: the sign of a thinker. Below his eyes were large violet bags: the sign of a tender soul. And within his eyes lay misery in its purest form, no longer tainted by any last scrap of hope: the sign of one too fragile to stand tall when assaulted by all the ugliness that has passed through those eyes. Let it be known that those who furrowed those brows, those who painted violet the skin beneath his eyes and stretched it into bags, those who placed, over time, the misery in this boy's eyes were the ones that had never bothered to look into them. And those who unquestionably accept his unfriendly demeanor are the ones that set his eyes ever deeper into his skull.

He sat down in the back of the room. Freak Girl looked up from her book, glanced back at him, and smiled gently. His face contorted oddly as a grimacing sneer tugged at the edges of his mouth: he was

not used to smiling, and the effect was ghastly. However, for a moment something shone in his eyes other than sadness.

"Well, look who it is," Tucker murmured, "Lucas Faggot!"

Lucas Farlot—nicknamed Lucas "Fart-a-lot" before the children at last decided that they had grown too mature for that particular jibe—glowered at Tucker. "Fuck you, bitch."

Tucker laughed. "Ooh, that hurt! So now you're too poor to afford good comebacks, too?"

"Fuck off."

"Ms. Avola! Ms. Avola!" Josh called, waving his hand frantically in the air. "Lucas is *swearing*! He said the f-word!"

"Lucas, please watch your mouth," said Ms. Avola, looking bewilderedly from her seating chart to her students, trying to find the boy named Lucas. "That kind of language isn't appropriate for the classroom."

Tucker leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, grinning smugly at Lucas. "Not appropriate for the classroom," he repeated, shaking his head. Scowling, Lucas slunk back in his chair.

It was then that the bell rang, and the principal interrupted the conversation with the pledge of allegiance. Every student automatically, out of force of habit, stood up and placed a hand over his heart. Except, Asher noted, for Freak Girl, who remained seated at her desk, still reading intently as if she wasn't even expected to stand. Asher felt a wave of anger wash over him. Did she have no respect for anything, even her own country?

"I pledge allegiance...to the flag...of the United States of America," the class droned listlessly. They had gone through this ritual every day for eight years. The words meant nothing to them anymore.

"And to the republic...for which it stands," Asher said, drawing himself up proudly in an attempt to put meaning into the tired old

words and shame Freak Girl's disobedience, "one nation…under God…indivisible…with liberty…and justice…for all."

"Look at his sneakers," Tucker snickered to Asher as they sat back down. "They must be, like, three years old."

"They're so gay," Asher agreed.

Ms. Avola began class then, and grudgingly the boys hushed their conversation for the emergency exit procedures. She went over the fire drill, the earthquake drill, the tornado drill, and even the long-outdated air raid drill. She then paused in her speech, tensely fingering the last sheet of paper in her hand.

"Due to…recent events," Ms. Avola began cautiously, "a new drill has been created. In the event that there is an armed intruder in the building, a message will come over the loudspeaker from Principal Thorp, saying 'the superintendent is in the building.' You are to remain completely still and silent while I draw the curtains, lock the door, and turn out the lights. The idea is, if the intruder is walking down the hall, he…or she (she added with a fleeting look in Freak Girl's direction)…will not see or hear us. We don't want the intruder to know anyone is in this classroom. We will all stay still until the police come and the intruder is arrested."

It was the Columbine incident she was talking about, Asher realized. Ever since Columbine, all the adults had been completely paranoid about kids bringing in weapons to school. But kids in *this* school—the eldest being, at most, fourteen years old? Certainly, fourteen was too young an age to even consider killing anyone. What could give such young children reason to kill, anyway? He looked about the room and saw no one whom he thought likely to bring in a gun to school. No one was even paying attention to Ms. Avola except for a few geeks. A lot of people were passing notes or whispering, Freak Girl was still reading, and Lucas seemed to be staring off into space.

"Lucas Faggot," Asher hissed, smirking. Lucas, shaken out of his daydream, glared at Asher. Asher laughed. He then noticed, with a

chance glimpse back at the single poster on the wall, that it was exactly the right proportions to effectively conceal the rectangular window in the classroom door.

CHAPTER 15

A Life Behind the Name Revealed

The street on which Green Haven Primary School was located was a long and winding one. Suburban houses crowded around the school and at the mouth of the street, where it met up with the main road. Most of the street was lined with trees. Hidden amongst these trees, set back a ways from the street by a long, unpaved driveway, was an ancient house in shambles, and it was here that Lucas Farlot lived.

The house cried out in vain for a new coat of paint and dozens of repairs. Its age was evident in the creaking of its floors, in the way it listed to the side, and in the roof shingles that had long ago fallen off to reveal a few squares of nakedness here and there. Within, it stank of cat urine. Old newspapers piled up to the ceiling; bowls of sour milk and cat food were scattered erratically around every room. The carpet, like the rest of the house, seemed not to have been cleaned in years, and everywhere there were cats and cockroaches and spiders cockily spinning their webs in full view.

There was a popular myth among the children in the neighborhood that the house was haunted. By the sixth grade, however, all puerile notions of a haunted house were extinguished in favor of a more realistic idea, and a true one at that: Lucas Farlot lived there.

And so it came to be that Lucas's residence alone was what made the house ugly.

This was entirely unbeknownst to Grandmother Farlot, who viewed her thirteen-year-old grandson in the same way that she viewed her brown, weed-choked lawn: something she would have to get around to taking care of eventually.

Kat Wilder expertly hopped over the various cracks and bumps in the house's ancient stone front steps and opened the door without knocking. Grandmother Farlot, she knew, would be lying in her recliner as always, in her bathrobe that smelled like mold and mildew, probably sleeping, probably in her own little world.

As Kat stepped inside, an orange striped tomcat rubbed against her legs, twisting around and around. She smiled and bent down to scratch his ear. "You're gonna make my dad sick, you know that? He's allergic to you, you know."

She stepped nimbly over the cat—and a few others—and past the fireplace to the narrow, steep staircase that she knew led to Lucas's room. On the mantle was a sort of shrine to Lucas's father, John Farlot, who had died in the Gulf War. There was a triangularly folded American flag, gathering dust as was everything else in the house, several pictures of John from childhood to adulthood, medals, and his prized hunting rifle hung above, on the wall.

According to what Lucas had told her, which wasn't much, his mother had suffered a nervous breakdown after his father died, and ran off, leaving him first with his grandfather, then with his grandmother. He barely remembered either of his parents. They were no more than their soulless, depthless grainy pictures sitting on the mantle, and yet John still managed to cast a shadow over Lucas wherever he went. The only item he ever paid much attention to was his father's hunting rifle, which he'd used to shoot cans on his fence before he found himself unable to find any more bullets.

Kat pushed Lucas's bedroom door open, again without knocking. He'd said many times that he preferred she didn't knock: it kept him

on his guard. He was such a curious boy! she thought, leaned all her weight on the door (the lock often stuck), and pushed it open with a shrill creak. Lucas, sitting on the windowsill and looking wistfully out onto the ancient, empty road, didn't even look up.

"I hate them," he said simply.

Kat took a step forward, sat back on the unmade bed, and nodded knowingly. "So do I."

"No, really…I fucking *hate* them. God, how many years of them calling me 'Lucas Faggot'? Who the fuck do they think they are?"

"They don't know what they're saying. I know it hurts, Lucas—it hurts me too, I won't lie to you. But I know they don't mean to hurt you. It's just a game to them."

Lucas got up from the windowsill and collapsed on the bed next to Kat. She lay back, her arms folded underneath her head. "That's just the thing!" Lucas said. "That's it, right there. It's just a game. Fucking tormenting me for years—that's just a game. My feelings, a playing board."

His eyes were carefully focused on the ceiling, Kat noticed, and he blinked all too frequently. It brought pain to her heart, to see him so stung. He rarely showed it if he could help it, preferring anger to sadness, for sadness was weakness. But when he was really hurt, she knew. When he was really hurt, his poetic spirit shone through the mask of anger.

"They don't even stop to consider what assholes they're being," he continued to rage. "And you know what? They're gonna get away with it, too. They're gonna go off to secondary school and just keep making peoples' lives miserable, and they're gonna get off scot-free. They'll have forgotten me, forgotten they ever knew me."

She wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders, ruffling his dirty blonde hair. "*You* should forget you ever knew *them*," she said.

"How the fuck can I when they fucking terrorize me every day?"

"Lucas, they're just idiots. No compassion, no decency—they're horrible people. Plain and simple. Their words are worth shit."

Lucas sighed, exasperated. "But they *piss me off*."

"But they don't have to. Just don't let them get to you."

"That's pretty easy for you to say, Kat. You've only had to deal with them for a year. And they go easy on you because you're a girl."

Kat snorted. "What does gender have to do with it?"

"They just tease you," Lucas pointed out. "They've never physically threatened you. Pushed you around."

"And that time they told the principal they thought I was doing drugs? That whole humiliating interrogation?"

"That's not as bad as getting beaten up," Lucas grumbled.

"It *felt* like getting beaten up. Having my backpack, my locker searched? Having Mrs. Wilder called and asked about any weird behavior and asked to search my bedroom? All my teachers and my friends called down to the office? And then afterward, seeing that proud fucking grin on Tucker's face…It *felt* like taking a beating."

"You're stronger than I am," Lucas said. "Mentally, I mean."

"You're stronger than *they* are."

"I'm taller. Not stronger. There's a difference." He bowed his head, his profile outlined in the yellow, tilted sunshine pouring in through the window. Kat smiled to herself, admiring his beauty. When she had first laid eyes on Lucas, Kat had thought him adorable then too. No one else, including her friends, seemed to agree, as he was not classically or fashionably good-looking. But Kat had always had a different idea of what was beautiful. She confidently, fearlessly stared into Lucas's dark, bitter eyes and was sucked in by the mystery, by the deeply obscured beauty in his soul.

Once, Avanti, always boy-crazy, had wondered aloud why boys like Lucas couldn't look more like boys like Tucker—Greek god Tucker, with his smooth tanned skin and shining blond hair. It only then occurred to Kat, after nearly a year of knowing him, that Tucker was attractive. She had never seen it before that day, and never saw it since, for looking into the shallow emptiness of his eyes she saw nothing resembling beauty: nothing whatsoever to love.

There was a harsh, nearly blinding glare in Tucker's eyes that, to Kat, made them almost unbearable to even glance at. Lucas's eyes were doors to a labyrinth of unexplored passageways, full of treasures no man or woman had ever uncovered.

He stared at her pleadingly with these eyes now.

"No," Kat said, "you're stronger because you're better than them. You're not nasty to everyone. You don't lower yourself to their level."

"Hah! I *can't*. The only reason I didn't kick all their fucking asses long ago is because I couldn't take them on."

"Good. Beating them up would only make them hate you more."

"It'd teach them a lesson," Lucas muttered.

"You'd justify their hatred and prove them right—that we *are* all violent freaks."

"But I'd *teach them a lesson*." Lucas sat up, leaning back on his elbows. He looked down at Kat with desperate meaning shining through his sad brown eyes. "Kat, they'd leave me alone! For once, *they* would dread getting up in the morning for fear of seeing *me*!"

Kat sighed. "It's a damn good thing you're too weak to take them on, then. I don't want to have to see you turn into Tucker Fitzpatrick."

"Kat, Kat, Kat," Lucas grinned, "fists are not the only weapons. There is another way to get back at them."

"So what are you going to do? Put bags of flaming dog shit on their front porches, ring the doorbells, and run away?"

"Whatever. Just as long as they pay for what they do."

The wrath in Lucas's voice filled the room with a heavy somberness. After a short while, Kat joked, "Why don't you hire Courtney Love to do it? She can make it look like suicide."

Lucas chuckled. "Yeah, no kidding. Hmmm. I just hate them so damn much. God."

Kat sat up, hugged him from behind, and kissed him on the cheek. Resting her head on his shoulder, she rocked him back and forth as if the soothing motion could rid him of his demons.

"I know you do, Lucas. I know."

CHAPTER 16

Into Their Eyes

The next day, Kat wandered the halls of Green Haven Primary School, in the middle of the crowd of children and yet set apart somehow—as always. She watched her peers bemusedly as they shuffled past, talking and laughing and jeering.

Everyone thinks they're the coolest, she mused. *The Preps think the Goths and Skaters are violent freaks. The Skaters think the Goths are overdramatic, depressed losers. The Skaters and Goths think the Preps are stuck-up trend-chasers. The Goths think the Skaters are shallow, smart-ass posers. And the people who refuse to participate in the whole clique system think that those who do are immature jerks.* She grinned wryly. *Sounds almost like you, eh, Kat?*

Only she *did* participate, she thought sadly. Too much to live up to her own high moral standards. Too much to reconcile her actions with her thoughts.

Even her thoughts were sometimes unreliable. She passed by countless strangers every day—too many to know even half of them by name—each with only enough personality to squeeze into the clothes they wore and whatever patches they sewed onto their backpacks. Despite herself, Kat couldn't help but feel a trace of disdain for each Prep she saw; couldn't help but see the trendy clothes, the face

glitter, the lip gloss and white eyeshadow, and think, "Bitch." She couldn't help but see an Abercrombie, Old Navy, or Aeropostale logo below a head of bleached hair and think, "Asshole." And she couldn't help but constantly remind herself that she didn't even know a thing about the people she was judging. The halls began to whirl dizzyingly around her.

Kat ducked into the bathroom and into the stall furthest from the door, and secretly pulled the bottle of Tylenol out of her backpack—a bottle she was not allowed to have in school. She swallowed two capsules dry and sat down on the toilet seat, holding her spinning head in her hands, waiting for the painful throbbing and panic to end.

When she finally managed to get a grip on herself, Kat strode quickly out of the bathroom and towards her next class, keeping her eyes carefully unfocused so as not to look too closely at her peers.

Don't look into their eyes, Kat. Whatever you do, don't look into their eyes.

PART III

Freak Girl

CHAPTER 17

He Fit In

The hours turned into days, and the days into weeks, and time sped by for Asher, who believed himself to be happier than he had ever been. Soon it was late September. Autumn had taken summer's place completely, and despite the dying leaves, the chilly winds, and the increasingly gloomy weather, Asher felt a sort of warmth growing within him.

He had promised himself that this year he would make a conscious effort to be more sociable than he had been in Abilene. In the past, he had been something of a loner: friend to none, acquaintance to all, and never getting to close to anyone. His experiences the year before, however, had proven that tendency to be his downfall. Asher decided once and for all that there was to be no more of this floating around from companion to companion, dipping his fingers briefly in each clique but inevitably drying them off in the end.

Looking at the faces surrounding him at his cafeteria table (*his!*), Asher was proud to note that he was now part of a clique of his own. A tight-knit group of friends who hung out together all the time, and who joked around as they walked to and from school everyday. Aaron had even compromised his only study hall so could eat lunch in the same period as the rest of them. And all six boys seemed to

genuinely enjoy Asher's company. This was an alien universe to Asher, magnificent to him in its reassuring rituality. He knew always whom he would eat with, and whom he would hang out with after school. They had even given him a nickname—Red, for his tendency to sunburn every time he spent any time outside. And he spent quite a bit of time outside.

He knew who he could count on to stick by him, no matter what.

Asher was not only a part of the clique—he was an essential part, he could tell, as the boys had spent so much time with him that he had been totally integrated into the group, and his absence was always palpable. He fit in. At last, he fit in!

"What's with Freak Girl?" he asked one day, his question directed at no one in particular but his eyes squarely on Tucker. Freak Girl had just walked by, heading for her usual table in the back of the cafeteria. Asher had watched her as she passed, the spikes on her wrists and the blue streaks in her hair glinting underneath the fluorescent lights overhead. She had looked down at him knowingly, and he had quivered uncertainly.

Tucker took a ravenous bite out of his turkey sandwich. "What about her?"

"Well…what's wrong with her? Why's she a freak? Why's she hate us?"

"I dunno," Aaron said. "Does it matter? She's *weird*. 'Slong as I've been at this school, she's wanted nothing to do with me, or any of us, and I got no problem with that."

"She's just messed up in the head," said Josh. "She's had it in for us since sixth grade. I used to sit next to her in homeroom that year, and last year, too. You know that like halfway through seventh grade, she stopped talking?"

"Really?" Asher said.

"Really. Wouldn't say a word. Even when she was called on. And no one could get her to talk, either. They had to make her see a shrink. They even had to take her out of school for a while. Then she

comes back to school and she's like this total bitch. I ask her where she's been all this time, and she snaps at me and is all like, 'none of your business!'"

"You were pretty mean to her," Ben said quietly. "You were always teasing her about her clothing and makeup. Maybe she thought you were making fun of her again or something."

Josh sent Ben an angry look. "I was just teasing. She didn't have to take it so damn personally. Lucas, too." He shook his head and turned back to Asher. "They're all just too damn sensitive. They need to lighten up, you know? Seriously!"

"Well, how would you like it if there was someone sitting next to you every day, hassling you about the way *you* dressed?" Ben asked.

"Look, man, whose side are you on, anyway?" Josh snapped. Ben turned his eyes downward and took a swig of pop and said nothing more. Asher picked at his roast beef, more full of questions than ever. It was uncomforting to see Ben stick up for Freak Girl. Ben was extremely intelligent: he would have been a geek, but for the fact that he was cool, too. His eyes were sharp and quick with all he knew, the wheels constantly turning, sizing up people and situations in a second. He solved most problems within the group and looked over all homework hastily done only a few periods before it was due. He was more sensible than Tucker, more responsible than Aaron, and, in truth, more serious than any of them. A stern look from Ben more often than not silenced Josh's occasionally, unintentionally cruel sarcasm, which (more often than not) angered or hurt his friends. Asher respected Ben very much, but couldn't see why he saw someone like Freak Girl as deserving of his support.

"I never been in a class with her," Noah said, "but I've heard rumors."

"Rumors?" Asher asked.

"Yeah. She was adopted, you know. Last spring, her adopted dad had to go to the hospital, and then he was going around with this

really bad bandage on his head. Wouldn't talk about it. But there are rumors that she did it."

"She's just a bitch," Tucker grumbled, "plain and simple."

Asher looked over his shoulder at the dark girl. She certainly seemed the type.

"Hey, Ma-argie!" Aaron called. An overweight girl had just passed by the boys' table, lunch tray in hand. She froze at mention of her name. "Leave me alone, Aaron," she snapped.

"Leave those pop tarts alone," he retorted. "What, are you fattening yourself up for winter?"

"Not like she really needs to do *that*!" Josh hooted. "Right, guys?"

Margie stuck out her tongue impudently. She knew very well that there was no reasoning with the boys. But she had far too much pride to simply stand there and take their abuse. "Grow up," she said. "If you have nothing better to do than call me fat, you need a hobby."

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Asher said. "I'll take up reading, how's that?" He picked up the book he was reading for English and examined the cover. "Here's a good one: *Margie Dick*!"

The entire lunch table exploded with laughter.

"She probably *has* a dick!" Noah offered.

"Yeah," Tucker laughed. "She's too ugly to be a girl!"

"She's not even a boy," Josh said. "She's a he-she—a nothing."

It was at this point that Margie's lip began to tremble, and she screwed up her composure, puffing out her chest and squaring her shoulders. "You guys are assholes," she choked, and raced back to her own friends.

"*Margie Dick*," Aaron snickered. "That was gold, Red. That was great."

Asher beamed. The comment had just popped into his head, a shining key to his friends' admiration. He felt a surge of pride knowing that his cleverness had earned the boys' approval.

He had never made fun of anyone before he met them. After all, what was the point of making funny comments when no one was

there to listen? And what was the point, in any case, of using his sense of humor to make a girl cry?

Asher shrugged off these questions. A slow transition was already beginning to take place, transforming him. This was already happening more and more often, quicker and quicker, and Asher was feeling increasingly comfortable with this second persona as the weeks progressed. He felt himself changing greatly, and it was a good change, he was convinced, for this new Asher was accepted, not scorned. He was popular, and this end must surely have justified any compromise of character that took place—if any.

They liked him. They thought he was smart and funny. They thought he was a good softball player, a good soccer player, a good basketball player. They thought he was a good friend. And he fit in, he fit in, at last he fit in!

CHAPTER 18

The First Real Conversation

Asher had gym class immediately following lunch—an arrangement he hated, as the food he had just eaten was still sloshing around in his stomach. He shared this class with no friend but the ever-quiet Quin, even meeker than he. As the weeks went on and Asher grew more outspoken, he began to grow frustrated with Quin's shy nature. Conversation was rare, and even when Asher managed to pry a few-word dialogue out of the boy, it was never as enjoyable as the discussions and jokes he exchanged with his other friends.

Asher and Quin silently changed in the locker room. Asher had always been very careful in the locker room, keeping his hormones on as short a leash as he could manage. He kept a stern hold on his eyes, refusing to let them stray from the clothes he was changing into and onto the half-naked body of another boy. A chance glimpse, however, of Quin's bright red T-shirt as he pulled it over his head, compelled Asher's eyes to flicker, if only momentarily, out of his control.

In a few seconds, he caught sight of Quin's smooth tawny chest. He was lean, with only the beginnings of muscles rounding out his arms. Nevertheless, his stomach was flat and hard, and Asher stared for a moment that felt like an hour, drinking thirstily at the sight.

Jesus Christ, what are you doing? Asher managed to tear his eyes away. He was fortunate not to share a gym class with Tucker, or else his secret would not remain a secret for very long!

He supposed Quin hadn't noticed, but couldn't be sure. Asher stole a curious glance at his friend's face. To his surprise, Quin appeared sullenly withdrawn. He looked as though he wouldn't notice if Asher had stared openly for an hour, so lost was he in his own thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Asher asked.

Quin's head shot up, eyes cloudy and distant. He paused for a moment to reconnect with the real world. "Um...nothing." Quin had, in his surprise, dropped the shoelaces he had been tying. He now picked them back up and continued tying them.

"No, really, what's wrong?" Asher asked. "You can tell me." Quin's eyes met his, conveying a mixture of sadness, hopefulness, and hesitancy. He coughed several times, and said "um" several times, and tapped his foot against a leg of his bench, working up the courage to speak.

Asher, meanwhile, was struck with the realization of what he had just said. Or rather, how he had said it. *"No, really, what's wrong?"* The words had been spoken quietly, in a somewhat higher voice, and with true sincerity. It was the way he spoke with his family. It was the way he had spoken before meeting Tucker, before his speech had turned loud and brash and tinged with sarcasm. What in Quin, he wondered, had brought back his old personality?

Quin bit his lip apprehensively. "You wouldn't understand," he said simply, and left it at that.

In silence they walked into the gymnasium and took seats on the bleachers while they waited for class to start. At last, Quin said in a voice quiet as the rustle of a bird's wing, "You made Margie cry."

"What?"

"You made Margie cry." He caught Asher's blank look and sighed. "Last period? Margie?"

"Oh yeah."

Quin looked at Asher through the corner of his eye. "You're always so nice when it's just you and me. What happens to you when you're around Tucker?"

"What do you mean?"

"You get…nasty."

Asher blushed in shame. "I—I don't think I get *nasty*…"

"You do," Quin said.

"I'm sorry," Asher said sincerely. "It's just that…sometimes, when I'm with all of them…I get kind of…carried away. Y'know? I don't mean to. I don't do it on purpose. It just kinda…sweeps me away."

"I know," Quin said softly. "You know…there are a lot of things I don't really like about Tucker. Or Josh or Aaron, or sometimes Noah." Quin sighed. Asher waited expectantly for him to elaborate, but he was silent.

"Like what?" Asher asked.

Quin bit his lower lip. "Um, I don't know," he said tensely. "Things."

Asher took the hint. "How did you get to be friends with them, then, if you don't like them that much?"

"Well, I was friends with Ben since fourth grade," said Quin. "And he became friends with Noah. And Noah was already friends with Aaron, who was friends with Josh and Tucker. It all just kind of fell together."

Asher nodded understandingly.

"Sometimes," Quin continued, "I kind of wish Ben would stop hanging out with Noah and Tucker and Josh and Aaron. Or Noah would just stop hanging out with Tucker, Josh, and Aaron. Or something." He ran a hand through his coarse brown hair. "Those three…I don't know. They make me uncomfortable sometimes."

"No, they're good people," Asher said. "But…yeah." He grew quiet. "Sometimes they make me uncomfortable, too."

For the rest of the day, Asher thought about their discussion. He could not get over the oddity that between the two of them there could be an honest discussion, free of shameless displays of masculinity, silly jokes, or sarcastic comments. The brief exchange in gym class was the first real conversation Asher had had with anyone all year. And from that point on, whenever he saw Quin, they would smile at each other just slightly, knowing that they shared a secret.

CHAPTER 19

In Which There is a Brawl

One day Quin came over to Asher's house to ask if he could see Asher's new X-Box. He came over the next day too, and the day after that. It became an enjoyable routine, and the Denmonts came to take Quin's presence as a given. They grew to know and like Quin well, and Quin especially took a liking to Jamie, who experimentally put his hair in spikes one day, out of boredom. Asher reveled in the sudden insight that he had a best friend. Quin brought out the best in him, so his mother said, and Asher felt as though he could tell him anything.

Well…almost anything.

"Girl bands are so obnoxious," Quin said as they were watching MTV one afternoon.

"Yeah," Asher agreed. After a pause, he added: "They are hot, though."

"Yeah."

Asher sat back in his chair and waited for the best, most innocuous moment to ask if he could change the channel.

"Why do you wear black lipstick?"

Freak Girl's eyes rose slowly, warily, from her English literature book, and for several moments she seemed to be in silent debate with herself over how to respond. It had been Alexis who had asked—one of the girls in Jenny Morello's posse. From the other side of the room Lucas watched as expectantly as did Alexis, silently rooting for Freak Girl to win one for the weirdos. She fingered the bracelet of wooden beads on her wrist, twirling it around and around.

"Why do you wear lip-gloss?" she finally asked.

"Cos I like it," came the reply. "And it tastes like strawberries."

"Well then, there you go." Freak Girl returned to her book.

"But it's different, though," the girl continued.

"How so?"

"Black lipstick is *weird*."

Freak Girl sighed. "So let me get this straight: wearing makeup to fit in is okay. But wearing makeup as an expression of who you are isn't."

Alexis paused. "I didn't say that."

"You implied it, though. You implied that because black lipstick isn't the latest craze, wearing it requires more of an explanation than does wearing *your* lip-gloss. The fact is, I like the look of my makeup, just like you do. It doesn't taste like strawberries, but I like it."

Few people had been paying attention when the conversation began, but by this point nearly all the students surrounding Freak Girl's desk were listening in.

"Well, you look like a freak," Jenny informed Freak Girl, tossing her hair over one shoulder. Her friends laughed in agreement. Freak Girl's eyes were fixed firmly on her book, but no pages had been turned in some time. She turned to the questions she was to answer for homework, to see if she could answer any of them. She couldn't.

"What if," she said in a quiet, painstakingly calm voice, "Gothic makeup and clothing was what was popular? And *your* fashion was underground? Cult? And what *you* wore was widely viewed as 'weird'? Would you still be wearing it? Do *you* have the self-confi-

dence to dress yourself however you like, in spite of what anyone might think? Just think about it: if Gothic fashion was all the rage, and you were dressed like me, and I like you, I would still be a weirdo in your eyes, wouldn't I?"

"Oh yeah, right, like I'd be caught dead in those creepy clothes you always wear, *Morticia!*" Jenny laughed. "It's so gross! You look, like, *dead.* You totally need to get a clue."

Freak Girl sighed and returned to her work as the other girls continued to loudly deride her clothing and makeup. From the other side of the room Lucas seethed silently. No matter how intelligent the argument, no matter how well spoken the point, no matter what any of them said to defend themselves, the Preps always won somehow. They always managed to get the last word, no matter how stupid and brainless that word was.

Lucas scribbled bitterly on his desk until the end of the period, then went to the bathroom down the hall. Immediately upon entering, Lucas caught a strong whiff of cigarette smoke. He wrinkled his nose. He himself had smoked for two years. Kat had gotten him off it, though. It had been such hell quitting smoking that he never wanted to see a cigarette again in his life.

Though the aroma remained enticing...

Damn it. Why'd he ever start?

Lucas stepped out of his stall to wash his hands. There, just walking in through the door, was Tucker Fitzpatrick. He and his cronies—Aaron, Josh, Noah, and some new kid with black hair. Lucas pretended not to see them as they came nearer, laughing and talking loudly. He washed his hands and dried them off on the legs of his jeans, ignoring Tucker's gang.

He was going to attempt to sneak out the door without a word to Tucker, or to anyone else. The very thought filled him with disgust. So this was the nonviolent resistance of which Kat spoke so highly. It felt like *no* resistance to Lucas; it felt like weaseling out. Lucas made a move for the door, head turned towards the filthy tile floor.

Tucker blocked his escape route. He sniffed the air suspiciously. "You smoking in here, Lucas Faggot?" he demanded.

"Fuck off," Lucas said.

"Ooh, I'm gonna tell Principal Thorp!" Aaron said.

"It's *so* inconsiderate of you," Tucker sighed in mock sorrow, "stinking up the bathroom like this."

"How can your drag-queen *boyfriend* give you blow jobs in here if the air's all full of smoke?" Asher smirked. They all laughed.

"He'd choke!" said Josh.

Lucas balled his hands into fists, trembling with fury. "Don't you ever...*ever*...talk about Kat like that," he growled.

The bell rang.

"Hey," Noah said, "he made us late for class!"

"Smoking is bad for you, you know," Tucker lectured. Lucas glared at him and tried to get to the door again. Tucker blocked him. Without thinking, Lucas pulled back his fist for a punch. Noah grabbed his arm in time, twisting it behind his back.

Tucker stared silently at Lucas's face for a long while. Lucas looked back, hatred in his eyes.

"You poor, sick little punk." He spat on Lucas, and his phlegm dribbled, like the runny white of a rotten egg, down Lucas's cheek.

CHAPTER 20

Tucker the Victor

All six boys waited in the main office for Principal Thorp to see them. Tucker nursed his black eye with an ice pack he'd gotten from the nurses' office. Lucas leaned back in his chair, tapping his foot impatiently. *I can't believe this shit.*

Asher glared fiercely at Lucas's apathy, at his bored expression. He had never in his entire life been sent to the principal's office. And Lucas didn't even seem to care at all that he was in trouble. Would they call his parents? Would he get detention? Would they—Asher's heart caught in his throat at the thought—actually *suspend* him?

No admiration from his friends for his quick wit was worth this.

Principal Thorp stepped out of his office looking tired and bored. "Come in, boys." They silently followed him into his office. He shut the door behind them.

"Fight?" the principal asked. Lucas solemnly nodded.

"We were in the bathroom, and we saw *him* smoking," Tucker said, pointing at Lucas. "So we asked him to put his cigarette out, and he told us to fuck off!"

Asher stared in amazement at Tucker, who spoke so sincerely that it was hard to believe the events hadn't taken place just as he described.

"Then I tried to go into a stall, but he blocked me and pushed me off. So I was like, 'Hey man, you're gonna make me late for class.' And he was like, 'I don't care.' And then he *punched* me! Right in the eye!" Tucker pointed at his black eye.

"I did not!" Lucas exploded. "I didn't do any of that! And I *wasn't* smoking!"

"Liar," Noah accused. "He even kicked Josh in the leg, see?"

Josh lifted up his pant leg to reveal a large yellow-brown bruise just beginning to form.

"Is this true?" Principal Thorp demanded.

Lucas shifted in his seat. "Yes," he replied.

"You kicked this young man."

"Yes."

"And Tucker's eye?"

"Yes."

Principal Thorp leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Mr. Farlot, I am very disappointed in you," he said, taking out a pad of pink detention slips. "Though, quite frankly, I'm not surprised. I'm calling your grandmother. And I'll see you this afternoon in the cafeteria, for smoking, and the next two days for fighting."

Lucas took his three detention slips. There was no use in explaining the situation, really. The punishment wasn't all that harsh, anyway. He had no problem with his grandmother being called: she wouldn't care. And he had had detention many times before. It was a welcome escape from home.

He did, however, have a big problem with Tucker being the victor. "I didn't start that fight," he said matter-of-factly, "and I wasn't smoking."

Tucker snorted.

"Mr. Farlot, one more remark and I'll give you three more detentions," Principal Thorp threatened. "With your history, I wouldn't say a word."

Lucas grudgingly stood, shooting a bitter glare at Tucker. He smiled brightly in return.

CHAPTER 21

Potentially Violent

"They searched my backpack, you know."

"They did?"

Lucas ripped a few pages out of one of his loose-leaf notebooks and crumpled them up into a ball for want of something to do. His rage gave him a restless energy to *do* something, to *go* somewhere, but he had nothing to do and nowhere to go. "For cigarettes," he spat. "As soon as I got to detention, the teacher there said it was Principal Thorp's orders. They searched my locker, too."

Kat heaved a disgusted sigh. "It's fucking unconstitutional. I swear to God, they're not allowed to do that."

"I know! But what am I gonna do, huh? Those *fucking* preps…"

"Just don't show Tucker that he's getting to you, okay? Whatever you do."

"Fat chance," Lucas grumbled. "They called my grandma, told her the whole story."

"Fuck. You grounded?"

"Hell, no. She doesn't give a shit about me. She wouldn't have cared if they *had* found cigs in my locker. Which they didn't. Big surprise. Oh, but guess what they did find?"

"What?"

"A *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* comic. They told my grandma about that too, and said I was 'potentially violent.'"

"What?" Kat exclaimed. "You're kidding! *I* read that!"

"Yeah, and you're all nonviolent and shit. But they confiscated it."

Kat shook her head. Adults were so stupid sometimes. "Maybe I'll try and speak with Principal Thorp. Try to explain things."

"There's nothing to explain. The words of a Skater and a Goth over the words of five Preps? No contest. Of *course* he thinks I started the fight. Of *course* he thinks I was smoking. He probably thinks I do heroin after school and murder babies. Wouldn't put it past me, right?" Lucas managed a sardonic grin.

"It's all in the baggy pants."

"Yeah, seriously. Ugh. Fuck this shit. Fuck it all."

"Even the adults stereotype us!" Kat ranted. "What bullshit. You'd think they'd grow out of it eventually, but no. It's enough to make me start dressing like a Prep."

"Not me. Kat, don't be so weak."

She flared her nostrils. "I'm not weak."

"You're willing to change yourself to suit other peoples' prejudices. Willing to be something you're not in order to avoid getting made fun of. I'd call that weak."

"I guess you're right," she said quietly. "We should be trying to show them that we're not so different from them."

"What do you mean? Of course we're different. They're shallow. They're jackasses. We're smarter than them."

"I bet that's what they're thinking about us right now."

"Kat, fuck it. I'm sick of this shit, okay? I'm sick of being pushed around by the Goddamn Preps. I'm gonna show them who's boss."

"Lucas, please..." Kat pleaded tiredly, "the best revenge is living well."

"Kat, that's bullshit and you know it. How does *that* hurt them?"

"Well, it doesn't hurt *you*. Whereas if you pull some stupid prank, you'll get a detention."

"I'm not going to pull a stupid prank. I'm not a little kid."

"Then for the millionth time, don't let them get to you."

"They haven't gotten to me. I'll be getting *them*. *They're* the faggots, not me."

Kat was silent for a moment. "This is kind of off-topic, but...I wish you wouldn't say stuff like that."

"Like what?"

"Calling people faggots."

"Why not? That's what they are."

Kat sighed, rubbing her forehead. "I'm just saying, when you call people 'gay' or 'faggots' and stuff like that, it's offensive."

"Kat, I don't mean *gay* gay," Lucas said. "When I say something is gay, I mean it's stupid. When I say someone is a faggot, I mean they're a wuss. I don't care who anybody dates or whatever. I'm not a homophobe, you know that."

"It's not what you *mean*," Kat insisted. "Put yourself in the mindset of a gay kid. *He* doesn't know you have nothing against him—certainly not from what you say. Can you just imagine what it's like for him coming to school every day and hearing people constantly talk about his sexual orientation, his lifestyle, his identity...and using it as an insult? Have you ever really listened for it? You go into school tomorrow and you keep your ears open, just for one day, for words like 'gay' and 'fag' and 'homo.' Just for one day. Count how many times you hear them. Now think about how you'd feel if they were talking about you."

"But they're not," Lucas said irritably, "so why do you care?"

"I don't know," Kat muttered. "I don't know why I even bother caring about anything."

"Hey, where are you going?" Kat had gotten up and was moving toward Lucas's bedroom door, coat in hand.

"Nowhere," she said, feeling her chest tighten and her head begin to throb. "I—I just need to be alone and think. Bye." Kat rushed out

the door, down the stairs, and onto the deserted street. The brisk autumn air calmed her down somewhat as she walked.

Thinking, Kat decided, was the very last thing she needed to do. What she really needed was never to think again—or, at least, not to think so much. She needed to turn her mind off and have at least one quiet moment without some sort of inner conflict. Oh, to be an idiot! To never have to think about her actions, and therefore never to be able to regret them!

But Kat could not stop thinking, and so she did think. Mainly about how to explain to Lucas the power that words and names had to hurt. It boggled her mind that Lucas—who was constantly harassed for his clothing—would be so insensitive to the feelings of people who were constantly harassed for something they couldn't even help.

Maybe, she thought, *he's just stopped caring.*

It wasn't really the same thing, though. Gay people couldn't help being gay, but a quick change of clothes and a haircut would turn Lucas into a Prep, indistinguishable from the rest. Kat looked down at the clothes she herself was wearing: her dyed hair was hidden under a knit cap, she wore no makeup but lip balm, and her plain blue jeans, plain blue shirt, and plain sneakers made no fashion statement of any kind. Kat looked to the entire world at that moment to be a perfectly normal girl, whereas going out in the clothes she usually wore tended to give people the impression that she was the Antichrist.

And yet, simply because she had chosen to wear plain clothes on this particular day, she still loved Gothic clothing. She was the same person she had always been. Perhaps one couldn't help her taste in clothing any more than she could help her race or sexual orientation. What, after all, dictated one's taste in clothing? What dictated her taste in anything? Upbringing, Kat supposed. She liked what she liked; she couldn't help what outfit or CD caught her fancy.

If she were to dress like a Prep—if she were to shop at Limited Too and wear cheek glitter and listen to 'N Sync—she could easily do so. But she would hate it. Deep down, she would still be attracted to the same clothing and music to which she always had been. She would walk past Hot Topic and admire the velvet and lace of their expensive medieval dresses and feel a pang of wistfulness. She would become sick of the pop music she had to listen to, and would long for Switchblade Symphony, and every once in a while catch herself humming a mysterious tune that, much later, she would remember as being The Cure.

Walking down the street in solitary silence, Kat amused herself by imaging a world in which there was a societal taboo against Goths. If the world were thus, would she be brave enough to still dress as one? Or would she hide herself in the closet?

The Skaters and Goths had a sort of kinship with homosexuals—indeed, with all persecuted people. It sounded so stupid, and yet...No, not a kinship, exactly...a representation. For the schoolchildren of this isolated little rural town, forming their own society within the boundaries of the school, there were no ready-made racial tensions to copy from the grown-ups. There were simply too few people who weren't white and Christian to really bother.

And so the children created their own races, and called them Preps and Jocks and Skaters and Goths and Nerds, and so they created for themselves a little Bosnia.

CHAPTER 22

"What is my Name?"

Asher spun his lock to the correct combination and pulled his locker open. It was just before lunch, and he was switching books for his next classes. The hall was nearly empty but for a few other people here and there getting their books as well.

He was just taking out his Grammar book when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Freak Girl walking hurriedly towards him. In her hand was a pass to the principal's office, its bright pinkness easily discernible against the white of her hand and the black of her nails.

"Going to the office, huh?" Asher asked. "What did you do this time? You been smoking like Lucas Faggot? Doing drugs? Drinking? What is this, your fiftieth time at the principal's office this year?"

The girl did not respond.

"Hey, Goth Girl!" he called. "Black Lipstick Girl. Hey, I'm talking to you."

Freak Girl continued on her way as if Asher had never spoken. Her eyes were unfocused, staring into the space ahead of her but seeing nothing.

"Lucas is a cock-sucking faggot," he hollered down the hall. A boy just emerging from the bathroom turned to stare and laugh. But there was no response from Freak Girl herself.

"What are you, deaf? I'm talking to you, Freak Girl!"

She stopped walking.

In one fluid motion, Freak Girl spun around, roughly snatched Asher by the collar and hurled him against his locker.

"What is my name?" she demanded.

Asher let out a nervous laugh. "What are you doing?" he sneered. His tone was convincing enough proof that she didn't scare him. However, he wasn't entirely certain whom he was trying to prove it to.

"What is my name?" Freak Girl repeated. She loosened her grip on Asher's collar, allowing him to slide down until his sneakers rested on the floor. The girl leaned in close to him, her black-rimmed eyes only centimeters from his face. He trembled slightly: her eyes bore into his soul. What *was* her name?

"I—I…don't know," he admitted.

Freak Girl was silent for a moment. "Don't know," she finally said. "Don't know."

"My name," she said in a low, quiet voice, each word distinct and charged with emotion, "is Katherine Ingrid Wilder. Not Goth Girl. Not Black Lipstick Girl. Not Freak Girl. My name," and she released Asher, "is Kat. And you'd damn well better not forget it."

Katherine Ingrid Wilder continued down the hall at a quick and heavy pace, leaving Asher to rub his throat and look on in astonishment.

CHAPTER 23

In Some Small Way

Kat stood outside the glass walls of the principal's office, clutching her pass. She did love Lucas; she loved him as deeply as a thirteen-year-old girl was capable of loving a boy. Perhaps more. But the way he talked sometimes…it unnerved her.

She was to speak with Principal Thorp, to try and tell Lucas's side of the story. To assure him that Lucas could not have started the fight. To assure him that Lucas would never start a fight with Tucker's gang.

To assure him that Lucas really was not a violent person.

Kat crumpled up her pass and headed back to class.

She paused as she reached Asher's locker, recognizable by the Texas Rangers sticker on its door. Kat didn't want Lucas hurting anyone, she was certain of that. Sometimes, though, she did wish that the Preps could pay, in some small way, for what they had done to him.

At the end of the school day, Asher thought nothing of Lucas or Kat or cliques or rivalry or revenge. In fact, he thought nothing even of his own conflict—of the secret that all too often was the bane of

his existence—, for he was very tired and wanted nothing more than to go home and watch some TV with Quin and rest.

He took the binders and textbooks he would need for the night's homework, placed those that he wouldn't back into his locker, and slammed it shut. Tucker's voice sounded distant and nearly incomprehensible in Asher's weary mind. He was talking about some movie or other. Whatever.

At once, a tiny folded piece of paper that had been balanced delicately between vents in his locker toppled to the floor. Curious, Asher knelt down and scooped it up.

God hates fags.

That was all the note said, and it said it in typed letters so as to leave no trace of discerning handwriting. Asher began to tremble violently, gripping the note in hands moist with newly forming sweat. His head shot upwards to see if Tucker had seen anything. He hadn't, thank God, but someone *knew.*

The penetrating pitch black eyes of Katherine Ingrid Wilder rested on him from across the hall. The two froze, watching each other. In Kat's eyes was a mixture of sadness, anger, and confusion. In Asher's eyes was fear. He had tried to instill in them hatred, something with which to threaten the girl, but to no avail: he wasn't like Tucker. He couldn't pick an emotion out of the air and deposit it into his soul.

Asher spun around and walked quickly down the hall without waiting up for, or saying good-bye to, Tucker.

CHAPTER 24

The Words of God

The notes continued every day, each more threatening than the last. Asher had only a vague notion of who was leaving them in his locker. He was, however, absolutely certain as to who had written the words.

It was God.

On each note was written a passage taken directly from the Bible. The first few regarded homosexuality: Asher's enemy and secret shame. The rest went on to describe in detail what exactly happened to sinners, the first few notes having already established that Asher was headed for Hell.

Every morning, the sound of folded paper dropping to the floor signaled yet another little piece of misery. He would lean down and quickly stuff the note into his pocket, hoping nobody noticed. Only when he was back home, in the safe confines of his bedroom, would he actually read it. Asher didn't quite know why, but he was for some reason possessed to keep and store every one of these notes in an old shoebox.

He stopped inviting Quin over to his house after school, and stopped going over to Quin's.

A great change occurred in Asher around the time these notes began. His eyes lost their spark—their luster—, glazed over and

became cold, indifferent to everything around him. He was once a bit quiet and shy. Now he never spoke. He was once madly in love with softball. Now he had quit the team, the explanation for his father being the frequent headaches that he'd begun to have. The aura of sweetness and innocence that had once enveloped him was gone. Asher became cold and sour.

Every morning, the sound of his alarm clock tore him from his few blissful hours of escape from the world and brought him crashing down to reality. Asher began to utterly loathe his existence, and counted the minutes until the end of the day from the moment he walked into school. Every new day, every new insult de-humanized Asher a little more. By the end of the school year, he was essentially an unemotional, unresponsive machine, not even grateful for the coming of Columbus Day, for a glorious two days of freedom.

He was tortured by the notes, and yet he could not blame Kat, though he was fairly certain that she was the one putting them there. And he could not blame God, for how could God be to blame for anything?

There was only one person to blame for the hardship he suffered, and it was he. For the passages placed in Asher's locker meant nothing to someone who had not sinned.

He kept his shoebox of notes under his bed, out of some bizarre compulsion deep down inside of him.

PART IV

Magnolia

CHAPTER 25

The Worst One

"I have toe socks," Avanti Bari announced proudly. It was mid-October. Kat Wilder, Avanti Bari, Margie Ruljancich, and Gina Sieber were eating lunch at their usual table in the far back of the cafeteria. Avanti unabashedly kicked off her sneakers, swung her feet onto the cafeteria table, and rolled up the legs of her enormously baggy pink pants to show everyone her new socks. They were pink, of course—lately Avanti had been going through a phase in which everything had to be bright, Barbie doll pink—and they were like gloves for feet, with a little cozy for each toe.

"Very impressive," said Margie. "Now get them away from my chicken nuggets."

Avanti wiggled her toes in Margie's face and slid them back into her shoes. "It *is* impressive, isn't it? For decades the sock was stuck in a period of no evolution—of stagnant, primitive development in which all toes were grouped together as one. But now," and Avanti drew herself up proudly, "each toe is celebrated as an individual! Finally, society realizes that no toe is equal! I tell you, it's a wonderful time to be alive."

"We're all happy for your toes," Margie murmured, engrossed in something she was writing.

"You know, Avanti, that could be read as an argument for toe inequality," Gina pointed out. "You're not prejudiced, are you?"

"Not prejudiced, no," Avanti said. "I'm all for toe equality, but I just think that each toe should be appreciated for its uniqueness."

"In a perfect world, perhaps," Gina mused. "Hey, Kat, wake up."

Kat blinked. She had been staring off into space intermittently since the lunch period began. "Sorry."

"Hey, what's with you today?" Avanti asked. "You're all, like, out of it. Did you get a lobotomy I'm not aware of?"

Kat shook her head. "Just thinking."

"'Bout what?" Avanti asked in a purposefully obnoxious tone.

"Lucas. Do you realize he's barely talked to me since…you know…the thing?"

"He probably figured out that you never went to the principal to defend him," Gina said.

"Shit."

"Well, why didn't you?" Avanti asked.

Kat twirled her straw around and around the rim of her iced tea bottle. "How am I supposed to know he didn't start the fight? That's the kind of thing he'd do lately, I think. At least, I wouldn't put it past him, judging by the way he talks."

"Trouble in paradise," Avanti said to Margie, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"I'm serious, he's scaring me," Kat said. "He used to be so cool about the jerks at our school. He seemed to actually have fun thinking up retorts to all their stupid comments. I think he found their stupidity amusing. Now he's just angry at them." She sighed. "Maybe he did start the fight, I don't know. He really wants Tucker and his gang to pay."

"I wouldn't mind that myself," Margie said darkly. "They were being assholes to me a few weeks ago, calling me fat and ugly and all."

Something flickered in Kat's eyes. "Who told you that you were fat?"

Margie pointed to a group of boys exiting the lunch line with their trays, heading toward a table near the door to the hallway. A head of sleek black hair attracted Kat's eyes. It was Asher Denmont. What was *he* still doing with scum like that? Surely, he hadn't made Margie cry.

"While I was on line," Margie explained, "Tucker said I didn't need any more food. And then Aaron asked me if I was fattening myself up for hibernation. Then the new kid called me 'Margie Dick,' and then—"

"New kid?" Kat asked, stunned. "You mean Asher?"

Margie nodded. "I think that's his name."

"Asher didn't say anything really bad, did he?"

Her eyes cold, Margie replied, "He was the worst one."

"Why are you so hung up over this?" Avanti asked Kat in-between bites of her turkey roll. "It shouldn't be all that shocking that any guy hanging out with Tucker freakin' Fitzpatrick is gonna be an asshole."

Kat looked to her friend. Avanti was intelligent enough, but she couldn't see what Kat saw; it wasn't something one could see, really. It was a feeling emanating from Asher. Kat felt somehow that Asher had not the walk, nor the eyes, nor the smile to be so cruel naturally. He had none of the traits that categorized him as an "asshole," as Avanti had said. She could see in the way he carried himself a sort of purity, so charming in such an impure world.

"Maybe she likes him," Margie teased.

"He *is* really cute," said Avanti. "I hate to admit it, but he really is. I like those blue eyes, too."

"Gray," Kat clarified. "They only look blue from far away. Everything gray looks blue from far away," she added in a bitter, detached tone. Margie and Avanti exchanged looks, and decided to let it go.

"Gray, then. Like ash. I wonder if that's why his mom named him Asher?" Avanti wondered aloud.

"Who cares," said Margie. "He's a jerk." She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. All three girls sat in silence, absent-mindedly staring at the hustle and bustle of the cafeteria, of other kids talking and laughing—and some throwing food—at the teachers on lunch duty and at Principal Thorp prowling around, looking for trouble.

"I don't even know why I care so much what they think," Margie admitted. "Their opinions don't matter. They just like egging people on."

"Exactly," Avanti said. "Those asswipes could make *anyone* look bad. It's like they've got some kind of talent for picking out peoples' flaws."

"What an awful talent to have," Gina cut in, shaking her head.

"No reason you should cry about it," Avanti said. "They're all stupid and gay."

Kat rose from the table, lunch tray in hand. "Suddenly I've lost my appetite, she muttered. She left to throw away her trash, looking back wistfully at her friends. Watching them from a distance, she suddenly realized that she never felt more alone than when she was with her friends. She returned dejectedly to the lunch table.

Conversation picked up quickly, but Kat was not a part of it. She silently watched the black-haired boy across the cafeteria.

He was the worst one...

You never could tell, Kat decided, whom to put your faith in. For deep within even the kindest of souls lay a dark, putrid wound, infected and festering, impossible to see from afar but the only thing visible upon a closer look. The wound disturbed Kat. All her friends, all her heroes, all the great men and women and movements throughout history were dark somewhere inside.

Kat overflowed with deeply felt frustration, knowing of this darkness, seeing it in herself so clearly. Knowing that she would never be able to rid herself of it; of the cruel thoughts that emerged without her permission from crevices in the far back of her mind; of cruel

things she'd said without thinking and without meaning them. Kat sighed in resignation.

The girls' table was dismissed from the cafeteria, and as a flood of students filed out into the hallway, Kat sunk down into her body, disconnecting herself from the world, unbeknownst to Avanti and Margie.

There was someone else Kat wanted to be: a better person that she knew hid in her mind somewhere, obscured by darkness. Her name was Magnolia, and she was the only person Kat knew who had no dark wound. Kat knew her inside and out, and knew, after every situation, what Magnolia would have done; what Kat *should* have done. Kat had written countless stories about her and drawn countless pictures of her in the desperate hope that she could *become* her. But the unfortunate fact of the matter was that Magnolia did not exist, and that there was no one in reality like her. Including her creator.

CHAPTER 26

The Tale of Magnolia

By Katherine Ingrid Wilder

Once upon a time there was a pair of orphans with no names. All their schoolmates insisted that they choose names for themselves, but their responses were always the same. From one twin they would get the reply, "Oh, but with so many pretty names to choose from in the world—all of which I am unworthy, I'm certain—how could you expect me to pick just one?" And from the other twin they would get the reply, "Who needs a cruddy ole name?"

The two were obviously different in temperament, which made it much easier to tell them apart. Both were fair, with blonde hair and blue eyes, but one twin had rosy cheeks and a pretty smile, whereas the other twin's skin appeared blanched, as if color had existed there before but had been wiped away. And while the first twin's hair was thick, soft and beautiful, the other's was frizzy and messy and always in knots.

They had never known their real mother or father, and lived with an evil witch. There were other orphans in the house too. Twin One cheered them up with stories and games. She was sweet and merry and always well loved. She always smiled and curtsied, spoke only when spoken to, and kept her dresses neat and clean.

But Twin Two was a horrible girl, always being cruel to the other orphans. She was noisy and bratty and self-centered, always getting into trouble and never minding her manners. Twin Two's nasty antics quickly overshadowed Twin One's gentle ways, as for every good deed that Twin One did, Twin Two did seven more bad ones. Unable to tell the good one from the bad one, the witch punished them both every day. The punishments were scary and often painful. The witch beat the twins mercilessly because they were so bad.

Twin One grew withdrawn and sorrowful. She loved her sister, of course, but if only Twin Two would change her ways! No one noticed the good in Twin One.

No one except a magical angel who looked over them all. She loved Twin One and gave her a magic relic to help her deal with the pain. It was a bracelet made out of wooden beads that the angel had had since she was very little. The bracelet, the angel told Twin One, chased away sadness and loneliness. No one could hurt Twin One when she was wearing her magic bracelet; the evil witch could rain blows upon her head, but she would not feel it. That was its magic power, and it was Twin One's only escape.

Then, one black day, the witch told Twin One that she must leave. The twins were moved to another house, and again Twin Two tried the family's patience. Twin One had given up on being polite and obedient, too sad from the loss of her angel to care what happened to her.

The girls were rejected again, and moved to another house, and rejected again, and soon they were basically tourists, hopping around from house to house, never staying at a particular residence for more than a month and barely even bothering to unpack. Twin One suffered many more punishments due to Twin Two's behavior, but she was numb to them now—a result of the magic bracelet, she hoped.

She had long ago stopped trying to become a part of any family, so it came as quite a surprise when she and her sister were brought to a

small blue cottage. A man, his wife, and their son and daughter lived there. The house itself was very plain, but a large tree blooming with cheery pale pink flowers carpeted the front yard with its soft petals. All of Twin One's hopelessness was forgotten as she gazed upon that tree.

"What is the name of that tree?" she asked the son of the family. The son told her that it was a magnolia tree. Twin One thought that was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard, and so on that day she chose a name for herself: Magnolia.

The odd thing about this family was that they did not seem to mind Twin Two, who now called herself Weed in rebellion to Magnolia's name. Weed was scolded, but forgiven for her bad ways, and neither girl was ever beaten, which perplexed them a great deal, at least to begin with.

For once Magnolia felt as if she had a real family, for these people truly did love her as one of their own. But Weed did not like this at all. It disturbed her that this family would treat her so graciously, and made her suspicious of their motives. She took her anger out on Magnolia, annoyed with her sister's kind and gentle personality.

Weed toiled endlessly at separating herself from her sister and this happy family. She lashed out in hopes of hurting Magnolia. She used magic to silence her twin whenever she wanted to speak, and replaced the pleasant words in her mouth with words of cruelty. Weed made the mother cry and hit the father and was cold to the sister, and blamed it all on poor Magnolia.

"Why must you do this?" cried Magnolia. "I am your sister! Have I not always been kind to you? Have I ever shown anything but love and respect towards you? Why do you sabotage me so?"

Weed laughed evilly. "Because I hate you!" And she left the room, cackling, leaving Magnolia to cry and cry and cry.

CHAPTER 27

What She Knew

A teacher on cafeteria duty examined the table's cleanliness. "Okay, you can go," she said to Tucker and his friends. They got up to leave.

"Hey, Red," Josh said. "Freak Girl's staring at you."

"She's been doing that, like, all period," Tucker said. "What's up with that?"

Asher glanced up. His eyes settled on Kat's. Time slowed down. The sounds of yelling kids and his friends' voices were suddenly muffled, their faces blurred. All that existed for that moment was the sad, helpless look in Kat's eyes…a pleading look. Her eyes bore into him again. And again he felt horribly naked. Again he felt as though Kat could see his soul; see the blueprint of his being laid out for her to judge.

But this time a sick, nauseous feeling took hold in his stomach, and his breath caught in his throat with one terrifying realization: *She knew.* Kat's eyes turned cold as she passed him walking out the cafeteria doors. "You worthless fuck," she muttered, her voice dark and hoarse.

And then she was gone. And the voices of Asher's friends and the kids and the teachers returned. And Asher snapped back into reality as suddenly as he had left. And all he knew was that the girl with the

creepy eyes had dug into his heart somehow; had discovered his secret. And she *knew.* And she could do whatever she wished with that knowledge.

And Asher despised her for it.

And he was positively *not* gay.

CHAPTER 28

What She Wished

Kat snapped back into reality as suddenly as she had left. Immediately upon emerging from this ghost world of drunkenness and fog, of unclear pictures and time slogging along against the swift pace of her thought, Kat cursed herself.

As she walked out of the cafeteria, she could hear herself saying to Asher, "How could you? How could you say such mean things to an innocent girl? How could you be so cruel? I thought you were better than that, Asher Denmont. I guess I thought wrong."

Asher met Kat's gaze. Her heart hardened at the sight of him, smiling, so cocky, not knowing—or caring—what he had done.

"You worthless fuck," Kat growled.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her eyes widened, her pulse quickened, her stomach churned and the urge to scream nearly overwhelmed her.

That wasn't what she had meant to say. That wasn't what she had meant to say at all. Kat had just lowered herself to Asher's level. Now what right had she to feel righteous, with her own mouth spitting out these hurtful things?

Magnolia would never say anything like that, Kat was certain. If Magnolia had been in Kat's position, she would have kept in mind

Kat's sheer inability to be coherent whenever she absolutely needed to be. Magnolia would have sorted out her thoughts and written Asher a note.

But Kat was not Magnolia. And she never would be. She entered her next class, collapsed into her desk and sighed audibly, rubbing her temples.

"Son of a bitch," she rasped. She felt another headache coming on.

CHAPTER 29

Fear and Hatred Overcome Him

In the animated, strangely comical manner in which one moves when his head is in the sky, Asher swung around the corner and headed up the staircase, Kat retreating hurriedly down another corridor. Quin was trying to walk with him, but Asher noticed neither his calls to wait up nor the fact that his own pace was quickening as he ascended the stairs, hindering Quin from catching up.

Asher's eyes were glassy, his gaze fixed on the floor but not seeing. What right had that girl to call him a worthless fuck? Furious indignation burned just beneath his skin. He had never done anything to her!

Tucker was right. Kat *was* a bitch. Again and again in his mind, Asher ranted and raged. But a strange sickness was invading his gut. Could she really know? Could her eyes have seen right through his skin, past his charade, and gotten to the Doubt?

She did know. He was sure of it—Kat had seen the nights Asher lay awake, terrified of his own thoughts. She had seen Tucker through his eyes. She had seen all his forbidden dreams, the idle wondering that bubbled up from the back of his mind, all the

thoughts that slipped past him, beyond his control. She looked on in disgust, knowing that he was a freak, a fake, a fag. A worthless fuck.

There was no longer any doubt in his mind as to who had written the notes.

CHAPTER 30

In Which There is a Chemistry Explosion in Earth Science

Asher's schedule crossed paths with Kat's for three hours during the school day. The first hour they shared was fifth hour lunch. The second was Advanced Math, seventh hour, and the last was Asher's favorite.

It was ninth hour Science, taught by Mr. Feuller. Science had long been Asher's best subject, and it being the last hour of the day made it even better. Not only that, but Asher, on the first day of school, had been pleased to note that he shared the class with Tucker, Ben, Noah and Josh.

Mr. Feuller was a tall, thin and liver-spotted old man with what little white hair he had left laid flat against his head. He was very grouchy, seemingly without any sense of humor, and was quite partial to long, boring lectures. But he was everyone's favorite teacher because he was completely and utterly oblivious. People talked, passed notes, doodled, used Science class as a study hall, and Mr. Feuller walked right past their tables without even noticing. Once, two girls ate their lunches in class. They had pretzels, nacho cheese dip, and cans of pop. They sat there with their textbooks, folders, notebooks and pens still in their zippered backpacks, having a verita-

ble picnic, while Mr. Feuller babbled on unwittingly about molecules and atoms and compounds. Those girls went down in Green Haven Primary history.

However, once he actually noticed someone doing something wrong, he could be harsh. Very harsh. And only one of his students had ever dared to question him.

The class had been given a test on the atmosphere. After finishing, they had been instructed to wait silently for everyone to finish before handing their tests in. Kat was caught reading a book.

Naturally, this had gone unnoticed until Tucker loudly pointed it out. Mr. Feuller ordered Kat to put the book away immediately.

"Why?" Kat challenged.

Mr. Feuller's face turned red. "Because the answers may be in that book, and cheating will not be tolerated."

"I'm done with my test. And this is fiction."

"CHEATING WILL NOT BE TOLERATED."

Mr. Feuller and Kat glared at each other for a few moments, the rest of the class silently looking on. Kat did not put the book away.

"Ohhhh, so you mean that part where Jean Valjean looks deep within his soul and finds the stratosphere?"

A few people giggled nervously. Some covered their mouths and shook their heads, looking at Kat with a mix of awe and pity. Most were terrified, though, as Mr. Feuller looked the angriest anyone had ever seen him.

"TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE."

Kat stood up calmly and walked out of the room. She returned with three days detention: one for smart-mouthing Mr. Feuller and two for smart-mouthing Principal Thorp. That event went down in Green Haven Primary history as well.

Asher and his friends all sat at one table, with Asher seated directly behind Kat. To them, what she had done was yet more fuel. Especially for Asher.

A worthless fuck, was he? He had never dared to cross such boundaries and insult Kat to that extent, but he would eagerly join in when his friends teased her. Once sufficient momentum had been gained, he would often go on to lead the teasing, and on occasion take on the job entirely.

Kat, with far too much pride to just sit there and take it, offered her own responses. And so, by the end of October, ninth hour Science had become a battle of wits. It was immensely satisfying for Asher to search for the perfect put-downs and spit them out in just the right tone so as to leave Kat speechless—or at least weakened. She deserved it. She was the one at fault. She was the one who had insulted him.

And she was the one who knew his secret. Asher lived in perpetual fear that one day he and Kat would be arguing, and she would shout, "Well, at least *I'm* not gay!" in front of all his friends. But she never did.

Asher was mystified. In Kat's palm was a hard blow against him; information that would humiliate him if leaked; a perfect advantage; an invitation to leap off the defense and onto the offense, to turn the tables. Yet everyday they fought and teased each other and everyday both sides said some cruel things, but never did Kat accuse Asher of being gay—the single denunciation that he anticipated and dreaded all at once. It began to make him somewhat nervous. Perhaps she actually did not know? Or perhaps she was saving her best weapon for a day when he would be weak? Asher prepared several ready retorts, lest the day come that the secret be spat from Kat's lips for all to hear.

His sharp response was kept in the back of his mind always, ready to be released. But the day to unleash it never came. In fact, a rather curious event occurred in late October that served to vex Asher still more.

Greg McMarrow sat in the very front row, in the center of the room, next to Kat and directly in front of Mr. Feuller's desk. He was

practically the dictionary definition of a nerd. His glasses were thick, his voice squeaky, his face covered in pimples and his hair sticking up at odd angles. He was lanky and awkward, wore horribly unfashionable clothing that didn't fit right, was an utter know-it-all, and—get this—the kid wore *days of the week underpants.*

It was too good to be true. Tucker never let pass an opportunity to ridicule Greg, but although Asher, Noah and Josh joined in, Ben always adamantly refused. "He never did anything to us," was his explanation, and his friends accepted that and respected his declination.

"He never did anything to you" was Kat's indignant response as well, but it always resulted in the teasing being passed on to her.

The usual procedure was in effect on this particular Friday.

"Can I borrow a pen?"

Greg looked up at Kat. He had always been a bit wary of her; her clothing and makeup made him uneasy and he had heard rumors about her being involved with drugs, and he knew that she was rebellious and disdainful of authority. But Kat was smiling pleasantly and her request didn't seem to be fallacious at all, so he reached into his backpack, drew out a pen, and handed it to her.

"Thanks."

Mr. Feuller was grading papers at his desk. The students were doing a worksheet—at least, some of them were. It was an easy assignment and Greg worked diligently on it until he accidentally dropped his pen. It hit the floor, rolled under the table and bumped against Tucker's foot. A feeling of dread washed over Greg as Tucker picked it up and held it out triumphantly.

Greg sighed. "Tucker, could I please have my pen back?"

"What, this?"

"Yes."

"This pen, right here?"

"Tucker, please just give it back." Greg's voice was tired; he was sick of playing these stupid games. All he wanted was to be left alone to work in peace.

"Maybe *I* want it," Tucker said. "What if I keep it? How 'bout that?"

"Just give it to me."

"Eeeeew, Greg wants you to *give it to him!*" Josh exclaimed. Tucker laughed and dangled the pen in front of Greg. To spare his dignity, he did not reach out to grab it; he merely glared at Tucker. "Come and get it, you little faggot."

Kat audibly tapped her pen against her folder. She had been tapping it relentlessly since Tucker had picked up Greg's pen and it now increased in rapidity and intensity.

"Look, if you just leave me alone, I'll leave you alone. Could you just make everything easier and give me back my pen?"

"Why can't I keep it?" Tucker asked in a parody of an innocent, slightly hurt tone of voice. "You wanna hog it all for yourself, gay-wad?"

"He never did anything to you!" Kat interjected, turning around in her chair. This outburst was primarily directed at Tucker, who was still holding the pen aloft with a grin. Greg sent Kat a grateful look.

"You're all *so* immature," she continued, glaring at the boys. "Stop calling Greg gay—he's not, and even if he was, there's nothing wrong with it anyway."

"You're right," Asher rebutted, his eyes dark, his voice thick with sarcasm, one side of his mouth curled upwards in a smirk. "We should be calling him a worthless fuck."

Kat's eyes widened. If it were at all possible for her to become paler than she had been originally, she would have just then. Speechless, she gaped at Asher. Ben, carefully not paying attention and working on his assignment, sent Asher a puzzled look and said quietly, "'Worthless fuck'...?" Asher did not hear. Ben turned to Kat, their eyes met, and he understood.

He returned to his worksheet.

"Why do you care, huh? You got a crush on him or something?" Josh sneered. "Oooh, Freak Girl's in love with *Gay* McMarrow! Too bad he doesn't swing that way, huh?"

"No, I'll bet *she's* gay!" Tucker laughed.

"I'm not gay," Kat replied softly, "but if I were, it would be because of guys like you."

"Yeah right, don't you and that girl Avanti hang out, like, all the time?" Asher hooted. "Something goin' on there!"

Kat's ears turned red. For a moment, it looked as though she was going to cry. But she turned back around in her seat without saying a word.

Noah sent Asher a look of disapproval. "Dude. Not cool. Avanti's not like that."

"That's right," Tucker said, not missing a beat. "Freak Girl's been flirting with her for years. That's why she's so messed up, cos she wants Avanti to go out with her and she won't."

"I have a boyfriend…" Kat near-whispered.

"Awww, unrequited love," Josh crooned. "See, after Avanti rejected her for the millionth time, that's when she started popping the pills, right, Freak Girl?" Kat cringed.

"Why go nuts over Avanti when you have a perfectly good girl right here?" Noah asked, pointing to Greg. Suddenly inspired, Greg replied, "I'm not a girl, but I think *you* are."

Tucker grinned. "You're right—we forgot—you're not a girl, you're a fag!"

"Don't come near me, dude!" Noah laughed. "I don't swing that way!"

Kat turned around slowly, her chin tense and her eyes wide. It was a calm sort of anger, a cold fury beyond any narrowing of the eyes or furrowing of the brow. Filled with a sort of resolute rage that surpassed any visible emotion at all, she stood.

"You are the most immature, childish, cruel people I have ever encountered in my entire life!" she shouted. "Do you think you're being clever? Do you think Greg enjoys this? You're a bunch of fucking assholes. How do you like that? Still think peoples' feelings were meant to be toyed with?" She turned to Asher. "And *you*. I thought you were better than this. I thought you were better than to hang out with *them* and make an innocent girl cry. And call people gay. You, of all people, calling people gay. You should be ashamed."

All the blood rushed out of Asher's face. Kat bent down to pick up her backpack and said to Mr. Feuller, "Yes, I know, I'm going to the principal's office now."

And with that, she stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 31

The Tightrope Walker

Kat did not go to the principal's office. She hurried down the hall, not quite running, but shuffling along as quickly as she could. He head was down, her eyes squinted in a vain effort to keep the burning tears from falling, and all she could think to do was command herself over and over not to cry.

She had no idea where she was going or what she was going to do. Surely Kat would not be able to explain her actions to Principal Thorp so he would understand...so he would see how her outburst had been justified.

Seeing the door to the girls' bathroom up ahead, Kat ducked in there on impulse. It was empty; the sound of her sneakers on the dirty tile floor echoed. She went to the very back of the room, dropped her backpack onto the floor in front of the radiator, and curled up into a ball next to her backpack.

Okay. Now you can cry, she thought to herself, and did.

It was only after about five minutes that Kat's common sense finally managed to conquer the raging sea of her emotions, and she realized with much embarrassment and shame that she could not only not go to the principal's office, but could not return to class either. Kat decided to stay in the safe confines of the bathroom until

the bell rang. She took her small, portable book of CDs and her discman from her backpack and put on the headphones.

Kat closed her eyes, leaning back against the radiator, immediately comforted. A thought occurred to her that she probably could not come back to school on Monday, as Mr. Feuller most likely would have spoken to the principal on the matter. The possibility that he would not was too much to hope for. At the moment, as far as Kat knew, her Science class was under the impression that she was in the principal's office, and the principal was under the impression that she was in her Science class. The balance was far too delicate for Kat to disturb. She felt as a tightrope walker might, and she wondered if a tightrope walker ever simply stayed where he was, not even trying to move forward or backward. She may stay balanced in the middle of the tightrope for the rest of her life, but that prospect was much less harrowing than that of her taking a step forward, slipping, and plummeting to the street below.

The bell rang at last. Kat gathered up her things, putting her discman on 'hold' and stuffing it back into her backpack, and emerged from the bathroom, her eyes red and puffy. From her locker she retrieved the books and folders she needed for that night's homework and walked home.

CHAPTER 32

Magnolia and the Prince Who Became a Frog

By Katherine Ingrid Wilder

One day Magnolia met a handsome prince who seemed to like her and agreed to be her friend. There was a problem with this prince, though, and that was a slimy green rash that was spreading across his skin. Sort of like in the movie *Princess Mononoke*, but this one was on his neck, not his arm. And also, the one in *Princess Mononoke* was a kind of purplish red color, and this one was green, like I said.

Anyway, the prince said, "I fear the rash will spread to my face!"

"What if it spreads the other way, going down, and covers your heart?" asked Magnolia. The prince seemed fairly unconcerned with this possibility, for he cared more about his outside than his inside.

Magnolia and the prince did not speak for a long time, and when they finally did, Magnolia was horrified to see that the rash had, in fact, spread to cover his heart. It had turned him rotten. He treated his servants badly and did not give alms to the poor, even though he had plenty of money to share.

"I must have a talk with him," Magnolia said to Weed one day. "I will sit him down and speak of the gentle, sweet prince I once knew. I

will tell him he can become that prince again, if he will only change his ways and not allow the awful rash to control him!"

Weed only smirked in response. It was an evil smirk.

Magnolia, after her noonday meal, was all ready to approach the prince and tell him of her pondering about his rash, and what she felt he should do. Little did she know that Weed had cursed her food with a special magic substance that would allow Weed to control Magnolia's tongue. So as soon as she opened her mouth, the understanding and helpful comments she had prepared climbed right back down her throat and she heard herself saying Weed's own mean and hurtful words.

The prince stormed away, and the rash on his heart started to throb violently. Within seconds it spread across his entire body, inside and out. He became a frog.

Now upset that his once-handsome face was so ugly, the prince became a very, *very* mean amphibian—even meaner than he had been before.

Magnolia was driven away by his cruelty, left without a clue as to how she could help him return to his original form without Weed messing things up.

PART V

Father

CHAPTER 33

Truth Revealed

Kat did not come to school the next Monday. Or Tuesday. Or any day for the rest of the week. At first, Asher suspected that she had been suspended from school. But as it became apparent that no one could be suspended for that long for such a small misdemeanor, a nagging feeling made itself a home in Asher's stomach. And when Kat was absent from school the Monday after that, the nagging feeling convulsed. That day he ventured over to what used to be considered Kat's lunch table. Three girls sat there. Three girls glared at him.

"Uh…do any of y'all know where Fr—I mean, Kat is?" he asked nervously.

"What do you care?" asked Avanti. "You're the reason she left, you jerk."

"Left?" Asher said. "What do you mean, left?"

"Kat's being homeschooled," Gina explained.

"Because *you* kept making fun of her!" Avanti interrupted. "Being such a dickweed in science class. You drove her out of the school, you fuckwit!"

"Now, now," reasoned Gina. "It wasn't all Asher. It was mostly Tucker, I think. And Josh. Those two, now they can be *really* mean when they put their minds to it."

Margie didn't say a word, her eyes staring daggers at Asher. He felt helpless, wanting to say that they didn't understand, but he wasn't quite sure what it was, exactly, that they did not understand. They just didn't know Tucker and Josh as he did. They and Asher had never meant to hurt Kat so badly. It had all been a game, nothing too serious, and because Kat always had a ready retort, he could not but think that it had been a game to her as well.

Even so, that afternoon Asher did not walk home from school with his friends. He needed a bus ride, alone, to gather his thoughts and sort out this mess. He hopped off the afternoon bus at the stop nearest to his house, but instead of going inside Asher left Oakland View Estates and headed down the street to Kat's house. A plain white metal mailbox marked WILDER on one side led him to a tiny, squattish house with a small front yard. It was a one-floor ranch, part of it covered in sky blue wooden panels, and the rest bricks painted white. The two windows on either side of the front door reached right up to the edges of the roof like a pair of eyes half-hidden under the low brim of a hat.

The front yard, green for the season and neatly trimmed, was nearly engulfed by a large tree. There were two things that Asher did not know about this tree. One was that Mr. Wilder had wanted to cut it down for quite some time, claiming it to be an eyesore and complaining that the many scores of blossoms that it shed onto the ground every spring were bothersome litter. Kat had adamantly refused to let it be cut down, even going so far as to threaten to chain herself to it.

The other was that it was a magnolia tree.

Walking up a path of large, flat stones, Asher approached the house as one would a sleeping lion. He rang the doorbell as gently as it was possible to ring it while still making a sound. A short, plump woman with graying hair and kind eyes answered the door.

"Hi, can I help you?" Mrs. Wilder asked.

"Uh, yeah, I'm here to see Kat? Please?" Asher—who had been closely examining his shoes—glanced up just for a moment before quickly shifting his eyes down again. He half-expected Mrs. Wilder's soft blue-green eyes to turn cold, for her to yell at Asher and slam the door in his face. But all she did was smile and say, "C'mon in and wait in the living room. I'll call her down."

Asher chewed nervously on his lower lip until it bled. He shuffled inside the house and sat down on the edge of the couch. Mrs. Wilder disappeared down a hallway which Asher could not see from where he sat, and knocked on a door.

"Kat, there's a boy here to see you."

A pause. "What boy? Lucas?" Kat's voice filtered through the door. Asher could hear her suspicious tone.

"No, not Lucas."

"Who, then?"

"I didn't catch his name."

"Then go and catch it."

Asher heard Mrs. Wilder walking back down the hall, quickly grabbed an issue of *Newsweek* that had been lying on the coffee table and shoved his nose in it, pretending to not have been listening. "What's your name, dear?" she asked him.

Briefly Asher considered using a false name, but couldn't think of one. "Oh—Asher. Asher Denmont." He smiled as pleasantly as he could manage. Mrs. Wilder nodded and headed back down the hall.

"Asher Denmont," she said through the door.

Another pause, longer this time. A door squealed, footsteps could be heard in the hallway, and Kat appeared. It amazed Asher how different she looked in a green sweatshirt and plain blue jeans, her face clear of makeup and her black-and-blue hair, unbrushed, tucked behind her ears. No pewter rings or silver ankh. No jewelry at all but a wooden beaded bracelet on one wrist. On her feet she wore not Doc Martens, but a pair of plain white socks.

Without eyeliner and dark eyeshadow, Kat's eyes seemed less intense. Her lips without black lipstick somehow made her seem more…human. Taking a seat on the loveseat across from Asher, her arms crossed, Kat looked more like an angry thirteen-year-old girl than the dark, spiteful creature she had always appeared to be.

"What do you think you're doing, coming here?" Kat demanded. Asher picked at a loose thread in his shirt.

"I wanted to say…I wanted to say that I'm sorry if I hurt you…or something." He paused, glancing up at Kat. No response. "You know, cos…Cos I was a jerk and…I'm sorry," he quickly finished.

Asher's pupils flickered up and down under his dark lashes, and his finger worked rapidly at picking apart the thread. Still Kat stared, anger in her eyes. Suddenly, the anger vanished and all that remained was confusion and sadness. She bit her lip.

"Asher…" Kat said softly. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you come here? Why are you apologizing to me? Do you really mean what you're saying, sincerely, or were you just pressured into doing this?"

Asher raised his head, startled, and for the first time in a long time looked Kat directly in the eye. "Of course I meant it sincerely," he said, slightly hurt, "and I wasn't pressured into coming here, either. I'm really, truly sorry. You were right—we were being immature and mean. I'm sorry."

"You say that," said Kat thickly, "but if you were so sorry, why were you so mean in the first place? Why did you make fun of one of my best friends? Why won't you leave Greg alone?"

Asher cast his gaze downward to the living room rug. He knew exactly why—it simply hadn't seemed *real* before. But Asher could not bring himself to meet Kat's eyes again and tell her that she and Greg and Margie hadn't seemed human to him; that he honestly hadn't given a single thought to their feelings; that they had only

been a part of the game: nothing more than tools to make his friends accept him. The realization made him feel foul inside.

And so the two sat in silence until a thought struck Asher. Realizing that he and Kat were all alone, he decided to ask her the question that had been tugging at his gut for the past week. "What did you mean when you...I mean..." Asher felt his face turn hot and his throat draw tight. "You got all ticked off about us calling Greg gay," he finally said. "And you said there was nothing wrong with it. And you said...you said that I of all people shouldn't—" Asher's voice cracked. "What did you mean, I of all people?"

"I meant that you should be better than to lower yourself to their level. You'd be too nice to say shit like that. At least, that's what I thought," Kat said. "Why? What did you think I meant?"

"Nothing," Asher said quickly, and again the two sat in uncomfortable silence. Asher cleared his throat. Eager to change the subject, he demanded, "Why don't you ever stand for the pledge of allegiance?"

Kat blinked and looked at Asher inquisitively. "Why do you?"

"Because—" Asher sputtered, "because...because...hey, I don't have to answer that. *You're* the one who isn't doing it. I don't have to explain myself."

"Because everyone else is doing it," Kat said, supplying him with an answer.

Asher glared at Kat. "Exactly. So why don't *you*?"

Kat's eyes bore into his. He looked away. "I might be wrong, but...isn't the whole point of America that you *don't* have to be allegiant to everything the country does? That you have the right to diss whatever it's doing, whenever you want, and not get shit for it? Aren't you basically waiving that right whenever you pledge your allegiance to the flag?"

"I—it—it..." Asher shut up, glowering. There she went again, making him feel strange.

"Of course, if you want to be loyal to the country no matter what, that's fine—but it's not for me, that's all," she said.

"Why not?" Asher demanded. "You don't love your country?"

Kat shrugged. "How do you love a country? It's just an idea—a concept. It's not real. It's as real as the worth of those little green pieces of paper we keep passing around. It's only temporary." She laughed suddenly. "That's the fuck of it! Judge people by the country they come from, and political boundaries change. Judge people by their culture, and cultures combine. Judge people by their skin color, and races interbreed. Judge people by the way the dress," she added pointedly, tugging at her sweatshirt, "and they change their clothes. In the end, all we are, really, are human beings. All of us."

Asher got the distinct impression that she was talking to herself and not to him, and that she had leaped ahead a great distance in the conversation without telling him.

"I don't like you," he told Kat.

She laughed. "Yeah, well, I don't like you much, either."

"So what?" he asked warily. "None of us should stand for the pledge?"

Kat shook her head. "No—it's just that I've gotten in big trouble for not standing, and that's wrong. I'm just saying, some can and some should be able to choose not to. I can't tell anybody what to think. Don't let me tell you what to think, Asher." She stared at him with somber eyes. "Don't let anybody. You're so trusting, and eager to be told what to do. There's sweetness in that naïveté—but there's danger, too. You never question. Never, ever."

Asher squirmed in his seat. Once again, she was talking more to herself than to him, but her words cut him to the quick. What could possibly be dangerous about following the rules?

"Keep standing for the pledge," Kat said. "But only if you genuinely believe in it. Do you know what you believe in, Asher?"

"I believe in God," Asher asserted.

Kat's eyes glittered in amusement. "Do you?"

"I wouldn't say I did if I didn't."

"Maybe," Kat said. "But I don't think you really know yourself."

Asher was sick of hearing her words, the words that turned him inside-out and upside-down. He bitterly blocked them out. "Shut up," he near-shouted. "You're gay."

Silence.

After a time, Kat asked—her voice so quiet it was nearly a whisper—, "Asher…you're gay, aren't you?"

Thus Asher's worst fear was released, as he had always known it would be, and yet the release itself was entirely unlike that which he had imagined. There were no peers in front of whom to defend himself, only Kat and him in the small, cozy living room with Mrs. Wilder in a room down the hall, audibly humming as she typed on the computer. Kat was in the most solemn of positions, the expected mocking sneer absent from her lips and sarcasm absent from her breath.

It astounded Asher that this was how Kat finally exposed that which he had gone to such lengths to conceal: that which was such a powerful weapon against him. They were sworn enemies, and yet Kat appeared to have no joy in that moment, having at last unveiled Asher's dark secret.

It was as if a great, heavy, rough stone had dropped into his stomach. The room was suddenly very humid, and he felt unbearably hot even as freezing cold beads of sweat formed on his skin. Asher no longer knew whether he looked sickly pale or bright red to Kat. He felt as if he were being propelled forward against his will toward some dark, uncharted oblivion. Neither Asher nor Kat dared speak.

*Even if he was, there's nothing wrong with it…*This was what Kat had said, and it bewildered Asher. Of *course* there was something wrong with it. It was unnatural—how could anyone think anything *right* about it?

"Why do *you* care?" Asher snapped.

Kat shrugged. "I see things. I see the way you look at Tucker. And you say 'gay' and 'fag' and 'queer' like you're trying to cover something up. I can see it in your eyes—it's shame, isn't it? How could you be ashamed of being yourself? That's really unhealthy." In a darker tone of voice, she muttered: "I should know."

Asher's head spun. And with the mocking inflection that Kat had spoken without, with sarcasm in his breath, Asher sneered, "Why do you even care? What, are *you* gay?"

"'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Martin Luther King," she added quickly, noting the brief look of puzzlement on Asher's face. "It doesn't take a gay person to be offended when otherwise tolerant people act like a bunch of ignorant homophobes, just as it doesn't take a black person to be offended by prejudice against black people."

Asher bristled. "Well, I'm *not* gay."

Kat stared at him curiously. "Okay, then. But why are you calling people gays as insults? And fags and queens and homos and all that?"

"Because they're insults!"

"They're derogatory terms specifically designed to make fun of homosexuals. They're on the same level as 'nigger.' Would you ever call anyone a nigger as an insult?"

"What the hell, man!" Asher exploded, leaping up from the couch. "It's not like it makes a difference!"

"*Everything* makes a difference, Asher," Kat pressed. "It makes people around you that much more willing to look at gay people as freaks. It makes gay people around you that much more willing to believe that *everyone* looks at them as freaks."

"Who cares?! They *are* freaks! They're disgusting!"

Kat's eyes burned. Her lip twitched. She opened her mouth, reconsidered, and closed her mouth. A frail whisper slid out from between her lips: "They're human beings. For the love of God, Asher, they're human beings."

"They're a biological mistake," Asher snapped. "And I'm not one of them."

Kat shrugged again, looking down at the floor. "And what will you do if you ever meet a gay person? Will you make fun of them, too?"

"I 'spect I would," said Asher.

Kat looked back up at him and stared right into his eyes. Her look was one of pity. She slowly shook her head. "You really hate yourself, don't you?"

His face turning red, Asher gritted his teeth. She was stepping over the line, her voice unsettlingly even, unemotional, calm; he could bear no more of it. Asher walked to the door. Kat followed.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! No, I don't hate myself. But I do hate you!"

"I don't blame you," Kat said. Her sympathetic tone made Asher yet more enraged. "You know…for the record, I never meant to call you a worthless fuck. I was just upset because I thought you were too nice to hang out with Tucker and his crew. It just came out of my mouth, and it was an accident, and that's the honest truth."

Asher's mouth began moving before he could attach coherence to his emotions, and before he knew it, he had blown up at Kat, and he scarcely even remembered his own words. "The truth?" Asher spat. "You wanna talk about the truth? I'm gay, okay, and *that's* the 'honest truth,' okay? It's not like I'm proud of it!" And he crossed his arms and scowled at Kat, and his eyes slowly widened with the realization of what he had just said. Horrified, he looked to Kat, who merely nodded slowly. No disgust, no smirk, not even a hint of surprise.

"No, I don't hate you," she said as if answering a question.

Asher feverishly built up an arsenal of comebacks, but found himself too weary to use any of them. "Why not?" he asked weakly.

"I know I have every right to hate you—all my friends do—but I don't. Because you're a good person, I know that, you're just a little confused."

Near paralyzed with fear, Asher said nothing. He opened the front door, shoved his hands into his pockets and stormed away, his eyes wide, his brow furrowed, and his mouth tight in a frown.

Kat closed the door. She leaned back against it, slid down to the floor and cupped her face in her hands. It had been a loss and a victory. A victory, because Magnolia had, for once, overcome Weed's evil powers. A loss because the prince had overcome Magnolia's. And the rash over his heart remained as it was.

CHAPTER 34

In Which Asher's Questions Go Unanswered

Wandering aimlessly along a few of the tributaries that branch off the main road in Oakland View Estates was a boy of thirteen years, strands of hair hanging over his downcast eyes, his shoulders slumped. A feeling of pure and utter shame, of confusion and misery, emanated from Asher Denmont's body. It flowed freely as a stream from every pore. Asher's silent song rang clear and sad, confined to this street by a stifling ceiling of gray, apathetic clouds and unwelcoming houses.

There was a terrible need raging and screaming in Asher's soul, but he did not know exactly what it was that he needed. To escape, perhaps, to simply leave everything. To cease these demons in his mind, to cease being as he was, to cease being at all. Or else to just sit and scream and scream and scream until his throat was raw.

Briefly, Asher's thoughts touched upon an image of himself ten years into the future—thin and feminine, holding hands with another man, so unmistakably a homosexual, an image formed entirely from stereotypes. He shuddered at the thought and tried to force it out of his mind. To be known as gay...how would it be? Asher's curiosity betraying any barriers set up by his compunction,

he boldly dared to picture himself with a boyfriend. Holding hands, kissing,—dare he even imagine?—making love. The figure was merely a body without a face, without a personality, without anything to love…but so was the girlfriend he then conjured up for himself. The thought of romance with neither the boy nor the girl seemed at all appealing to Asher.

A notion struck him suddenly and, with a bit of guilt, Asher thought of Tucker. How would it be to hold his hand? To kiss him? On a date, talking, laughing, Tucker flashing his brilliant smile…loving hands…soft lips…

Oh, God. Oh, dear God. Asher collapsed onto the sidewalk. A few small drops of rain splattered onto his back.

You stupid, disgusting, perverted piece of filth! Asher screamed inside his head as the truth arose in him for the first time. He was in love with Tucker.

Could Asher not, like his father, fall in love and marry a nice woman and start a family with a few children? Could he not create, like his father, a nice, upright Christian family in a nice, upright rural town? The instinctual desire was there, as it always had been, but his wife was but a shadowy phantom image. It was with horror that Asher came to realize that he could imagine a future with only Tucker. Yet again, waves of fear, then anger, then disgust washed over him until it all converged into a single, powerful sense of self-hatred throbbing in his head.

It was wrong. It was all so very, very wrong. Asher felt completely certain in his mind that he was not gay, for the simple reason that he could not be, because it would not be fair. The word "gay" could not apply to him; it could not possibly accurately describe Asher's feelings for Tucker—but then, what would be? What was he, if not gay?

"I'm straight, I'm straight, I'm straight, I'm straight," Asher murmured under his breath, believing it less each time he said it. He looked up at the sky. Fat raindrops hurtled to the ground, borne of

the blanket of dark gray clouds gathered thickly overhead. There was no sunlight, no blue sky, no cheer anywhere.

"WHY?" Asher cried to the heavens, standing up. Why would God do this to him? Why, if these desires were evil, tempt Asher by filling his mind with them? He had never done anything too bad—he had not sinned. Why must he be punished with this curse, this disease?

Why?

Soaking wet and barely noticing the cold and the wetness, Asher trudged home.

CHAPTER 35

What Makes a Man

"Dad?"

Mr. Denmont looked up from his power tools. He was a solid fellow, tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, with only a potbelly to suggest middle age. He had the appearance of an aging football player, his once-lush black hair thinning in a spot at the top of his head and streaked with gray at the temples. Wrinkles framed his dull blue eyes. Today was one of the very few that he was home early. Asher came home, noted the oddity of his father's presence, took a shower—it seemed he would never be able to wash all the dirt off of him—and changed into clean clothes. He then went into the garage where his father was replacing a broken leg of Jamie's bed.

"Hey, Sport," Mr. Denmont said, wearily smiling and standing up to stretch. He looked at Asher with soft, watery eyes, as if drunk or weeping. "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you for a little?" Mr. Denmont picked up on his son's solemnity. His smile promptly sank into a look of concern. He motioned to a metal stool at rest near his workbench. "Siddown, Son. What's the matter?"

Asher sat on the edge of the stool, tapping his hands together restlessly. "Dad," he said, "what makes a man?"

Mr. Denmont smiled warmly and affectionately squeezed his son on the shoulder. "Good question. Well…I've always thought that a good man should be responsible for his actions. He also should forgive others for theirs. He should help his friends out whenever he can. See, Son, nobility and kindness are what make a true man. A true man never hesitates to stand up for what he believes in. He is loyal to his God, his wife, his family, and his community. He works hard to be the best he can be, to provide his family with the best he can." Asher's father wavered slightly. "Even if his best isn't all that great." He took a deep breath. "That's what *I* think makes a man, anyhow."

Asher swallowed and uttered, in a quavering voice, "Is a gay man a man?" after which came the dreaded pause. Asher's heart pounded in his chest, his cheeks growing hot with fear and nervousness as Mr. Denmont leaned back, cleared his throat, and leaned forward again. Asher's hands were slippery with sweat. With wide eyes he looked to his father.

"Well…a gay man *could* be a man," he finally said.

"If…?" said Asher. *Damn you, you fool! You idiot!* He had spoken too soon. He had sounded too eager.

"Here's the thing about homos, Sport," Mr. Denmont began, "they've strayed off the right path, into sin. Instead of living natural, healthy lives, they've been tempted towards an evil lifestyle. It goes against nature, against God. And the fact that they're *proud* of it—well, that's just sickening! Is the alcoholic proud? What about the murderer or the heroin addict or the stripper? It's this crazy society…nowadays it's becoming acceptable to do all kinds of nasty things." Mr. Denmont paused.

"Queers can be men, should they so choose. See…sinners can be led to the right path. They don't have to…act…in…ways that…well, you know. You can take a gay man, show him his wrongdoing, and lead him to a happy, normal life. It is possible."

"But what if he can't help it? What if he really doesn't want to be gay, but he just, y'know, can't help it?"

His father laughed. "No such thing! Unless the guy's got some kind of mental problem, he can be straight.

"Listen, it's tempting to steal. It's tempting to do drugs. It's tempting for kids your age to have sex, though I hope to God you and Jamie don't do any of that. And I guess to some sick, twisted people, it's tempting to be queer. But in the end, God's word wins out if you don't give in to those temptations." Silence. "Say, Son, ah, why all the questions?"

"I—I…I don't know. Just wondering," Asher said quickly and affixed a pained smile to his face. He hopped off the stool and headed back inside the house.

You're so stupid, Asher thought to himself, shaking his head. *You should have said someone from school was gay. Someone you knew.* Then he could have played the role of the Concerned Believer, wanting to lead the sinner onto the path of truth. Then Mr. Denmont would have been so proud of him. So very, very proud.

Asher felt like he was going to vomit.

CHAPTER 36

In Which Father's Answers Go Unquestioned

His feet heavy and his head heavier, Asher trudged up the stairs and into his bedroom. He closed the door—something he rarely did—and unhooked the clasp of his crucifix necklace—something he *never* did—and lay down on the bed. He examined the cross.

This tiny, plain token that Asher had kept close to his heart since it was given to him so many years ago had come to signify all that was good and pure in the world. For no matter what troubled Asher throughout the day, he needed only to look down to be reminded that Jesus was watching over him. And under the Lord's eyes he was loved unconditionally.

But the cross now seemed to be nothing but a cold, hard piece of metal, its shine infuriatingly indifferent to Asher's dilemma. His father's words were turned over in his head, prodded at and picked apart and set down again, no different or more easily discernible than before.

What Asher could gather was only what he had known all along: that he was, put simply, wrong. All this time he had been dangerously perched on the precipice of sin and had not even realized it. It was comforting to Asher that he could be forgiven for the sinful

thoughts that had plagued his mind in the past, if only he could stop them.

But could he? This…this *thing* had forged its way into his brain without permission, without warning. Asher had never wished these thoughts to come; it was frightening how little control he truly had over his own mind and body. These thoughts were a cancer in his soul. They could only do harm to him, controlling him, forcing him against God.

"But what if he can't help it? What if he really doesn't want to be gay, but he just, you know, can't help it?"

"No such thing!"

No such thing. No such thing as one who lacks control over his own brain. No such thing as one who is not gay by choice. Then what was wrong with Asher?

"Unless the guy's got some kind of mental problem…"

Could that be it? Asher leapt upon this new notion as a starving wolf does upon a scrap of meat. *What kind of mental problem?* Asher wondered urgently. Could it be cured with medicine? Therapy? But he had no more to chew on than that small morsel which his father had given him. Going downstairs and approaching his father to request an elaboration on this statement would be too great a risk. Asher was trapped. The fact remained, despite all else, that there was something terribly wrong with him. Had God forsaken him? What had he done to deserve such a sick, twisted mind?

All at once the confusion, fear, repulsion and self-pity running rampant inside Asher's soul folded into calm, bitter resolution. There was no way to avoid sin. Asher had no say in this, apparently. It seemed obvious now what was going on: if he continued to be plagued by this illness, whether or not he acted upon it, he would continue to sin. If he continued to sin, he would go to Hell. If he continued to live, he would continue to sin. That was, *if* he continued to live. If.

Three gentle knocks on his door jolted Asher out of his deliberation. "Asher, Hon—time for dinner," Mrs. Denmont said, her voice muffled through the wood of the door.

"Okay," Asher said, his voice cracking, and stood. His cross lay on his bedspread, its luster gone. Asher's neck felt strangely naked. But this was best. And so he went downstairs to dinner, sunken deep into a shell that his family could not detect as they sat down to eat.

Asher watched Mrs. Denmont slice up the meatloaf. He gazed upon his mother's knife with a brutal and terrifying longing, the morbidity of which he had never felt before. She lay a slice of meatloaf on everyone's plate, lay the weapon down on the side of the plate and took her seat beside Jamie. And they prayed, Asher growing number with every word, and they ate, Asher's spirit traveling miles beyond the amicable, generic kitchen in which his body was seated, beyond the inane chitchat of his amicable, generic family. He ate his meal and tasted none of it. He did not consciously move his hands and mouth to eat, or his lips to smile and compliment the food. He heard his voice contribute, now and then, to the conversation. Oh, Mrs. Mackenzie is expecting a baby? That's nice. That no-good Pete…always showing up late to work. You're good not to fire him, Dad. What?

Asher blinked. "What?"

"I said, you look a little distant," Mrs. Denmont said. "Are you alright?"

"Um, yeah," Asher said. "Just tired."

"You came home pretty late today," she said.

"I went over a friend's house," Asher said. It wasn't a lie, really…except for the "friend" part.

"Oh?" Mrs. Denmont sounded unconvinced. "Could you please tell me where you're going next time? Whose—"

"Quin's house?" Mr. Denmont asked. "That Hispanic kid you hang out with all the time?" His words were to his wife's what a tornado is to a small bird: Mrs. Denmont's words flew gracefully out of

her mouth and fluttered their wings in a frantic effort to stay aloft. Mr. Denmont's thunderous roar blew them all out the window. As was her nature, Mrs. Denmont smiled softly, adjusted herself in her seat, and continued eating as though she had never spoken.

"No," Asher said. "A different friend."

"Tucker?"

"No. A different friend." His tone made it quite clear that he didn't want to discuss the situation. Mr. Denmont cleared his throat.

"I'm glad you've got your friends," he said. "I know how tough a move is on you kids. You've got friends at home already, you're all settled in with the school and your teachers, and you gotta leave all your friends…" Asher tuned out at that point. From time to time he smiled and nodded absently. *I didn't* have *any friends in Abilene, okay?* he ranted inside his head. *They all found out I was gay, okay? No one wanted to hang around with a faggot, okay?*

In the dusky arcades of his mind Asher could feel the icy, biting edge of the knife pierce his skin, slice through veins. His blood would be freed to spill upon the floor, and thus the world would be freed of Asher and his illness. For if he was definitely going to Hell, it would be so much faster and easier—and better for everyone, in the long run—if he would give himself a bit of a head start.

How, after all, could one live with the knowledge that he is quite assuredly doomed? No other possibilities, no other options, no way to stop it. No way to prevent the inevitable. What good would come of Asher if he was to live another day? What good would come of the world?

Poison pulsed through his veins: a poison that sickened his blood, a poison that threatened to destroy him, teasingly holding aloft his dark fate with a proud grin, tainting his soul as it flowed through his bloodstream. But Asher could stop the current.

"Have some more broccoli, Asher," Mrs. Denmont said.

With hands controlled by someone else, Asher reached across the table to help himself to a few more stalks of cooked broccoli.

"Thattaboy," Mr. Denmont said, smiling. "You'll grow up to be big and strong."

Asher smiled in a somewhat absent manner and speared a broccoli stalk with his fork. Inwardly, he laughed bitterly at the fact that he would not grow up at all.

CHAPTER 37

The Knife

Light steps. Slow, soft—lean on the banister. Always leaning on the banister. Place your feet on the very edge of each step; they squeal in the middle. Carefully, now. Slowly, now.

Asher was a figure of black upon black, his house an empty oblivion but for a few squares of dim blue light that threw themselves here and there from the windows. He held out both hands in front of him to prevent himself from stupidly walking into a wall or a piece of furniture. He knew the entrance to the kitchen by the floor lamp that stood guard beside it, and by the way the soft carpet suddenly gave way to smooth, hard linoleum.

It was as in a dream. The detached silver face of a partly obscured moon gleamed down from its place in the heavens, its thin, delicate light pouring through the kitchen window and onto…*it.*

The knife.

It gleamed, calling out to Asher, begging to be held, begging to cut, begging to slice, begging to end a life. He wet his lips, made his way silently to the kitchen counter, and picked it up. It was heavier than he'd expected, but no matter.

The boy crossed the short length of the kitchen more swiftly and carelessly than before, groped his way through the living room, tip-

toed up the stairs and found his bedroom, closing the door behind him. He turned on the small lamp on his night table and sat down on the side of his bed, the knife in his lap.

Here in his hands was the key to Hell.

Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead and rolled down pale, ice-cold cheeks. Both hands trembled, dripping with sweat—right hand gripped the knife, held above left, which was outstretched and poised in a fist.

Asher slowly brought the knife closer and closer to his wrist. He could see the blue veins pulsing with his blood...blood full of poison. Asher's hands started trembling more and more violently as he lowered the knife.

No more would he waste time or space on this world. No more would he be forced to hide himself, to live among loving friends and family who would despise him if only they knew. No more of life. No more.

The knife slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor, nicking his arm as it fell. It drew a little blood; Asher pulled a tissue from its box on his nightstand, rolled it into a ball and pressed it to the wound, biting his lip to keep from groaning in pain. He rocked back and forth on his bed, stunned at what he had almost done.

Silently the boy retrieved the knife and wiped his blood from the edge. It was placed carefully in the third compartment in the uppermost drawer of his bureau, and a layer of socks strewn over it. After a brief hesitation he crossed the room, knelt before his bed, reached under it, and pulled out a shoebox.

His arm throbbing and his heart sick, Asher removed the lid of the shoebox and slowly unfolded one of the many tiny pieces of paper inside.

God hates fags.

Asher felt tears well up in his eyes, blinked, and read another note.

"Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind. It is abomination." Lev 18:22

"If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, their blood shall be upon them." Lev 20:13

God's words, not his. Not the words of some bigot. Not the words of a cruel and vindictive person, but the words of God.

Tears blurring his vision, Asher left the box open on the floor, turned out the light, and collapsed into bed. He buried his face in his pillow, wiping the tears away.

Crying, he thought disgustedly. *And now you're crying. You stupid fag.* Real *men don't cry.* Asher hurriedly wiped the last of his tears away before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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See the town. The town is quiet and small. The town is full of good, happy people.
See the house. The house is pretty and blue. It has big front windows. See the windows shine. Shine, windows, shine.

See the family. Daddy is big and strong. See Daddy laugh a big, strong laugh. Laugh, Daddy, laugh. Mommy is very kind. See Mommy cook. Cook, Mommy, cook.
See Asher. Asher has black hair and sad gray eyes. Smile, Asher, smile.
Asher will not smile.

Asher is a good Christian boy. Asher is nice, smart and very polite. Mommy and Daddy are proud. They love Asher very much. But they do not love gay people. Daddy does not like gay people. Mommy does not like gay people.

Asher hates gay people.

Asher has a dirty little secret.

Asher has a knife in his drawer.

The knife is sharp. The knife cuts well.

See the knife cut.

Cut, knife, cut.

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